

NOVEL
4

Written by
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DRUGSTORE in ANOTHER world

~ The Slow Life of a ~
Cheat Pharmacist ~

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CHARACTERS

EIL

MINA

VIVI

PAULA

NOELA

REIJI



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Afterword



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Seven Seas Entertainment

CHEAT KUSUSHI NO SLOW LIFE:
ISEKAI NI TSUKURO DRUGSTORE VOL. 4

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Chapter 1:

Financial Compensation

“NEXT JOB, Master!”

“Huh?” Noela was really putting her back into her work, to my surprise. “Uh, let’s see.”

I told her to set up for some good old medicine making, and the werewolf girl zipped to the lab.

Something’s definitely up. I decided not to ask Noela about it; I wasn’t going to complain about her working hard.

Noela was usually pretty poor at dealing with customers, and she sometimes drank potions on the job. Fortunately, the drugstore’s customers were generous and patient—they tended to see the werewolf girl as Kirio Drugs’ mascot. Still, when it came to customer service, I honestly never expected much of her.

“Finished, Master!” Noela informed me, poking her head out of the laboratory.

“Awesome. Thanks.”

Mina watched the storefront as I holed up in the lab as usual. *I need to restock our shelves.* As I started working, Noela stood right beside me. She watched me carefully, wagging her tail.

“Hey, Noela, what’s up?”

“Noela work hard today, Master.”

“You sure did, partner.”

“Noela old enough!” Her eyes sparkled as she thrust out her palm.

I was getting serious déjà vu. *When I was a little kid, I helped out around the house with one goal...*

“Noela want allowance!”

“Of course you do.” Now it all made perfect sense. “Go ask Mina—she keeps

tabs on our budget. You know that.”

“Garroo...” Noela’s ears drooped.

I patted her head. “Judging by that reaction, you already asked Mina.”

“Yeah. Mina cheapskate. Won’t give Noela 300 rin!”

I think I know why she suddenly wants an allowance. Noela played with the neighborhood kids now and then, and I overheard those brats taunting her about her inability to save money.

“What?! You don’t get an allowance?” they teased. “Ha! You must be dirt poor!”

“Noela get allowance!” she’d declared defiantly. “Slap you in face with bills later!”

That reminded me—Noela’s imaginary allowance took the form of *bills*.

“So, what’d Mina tell you?”

““Noela waste too much money.””

I agree.

“Noela want smack bullies in face with bills, Master!” she whined, clinging to me tearfully. “Vivi and Ejil get money! Why not Noela?”

First things first—I need to teach her that “allowance” doesn’t take the form of a bankroll. Actually...

“Noela, up till now, I’ve paid you in your beloved potions, right?” I reminded her. “How much do those cost at the drugstore?”

“Twelve hundred rin,” replied Noela. “N-Noela earn twelve hundred rin a day?!”

The werewolf girl suddenly trembled in fear. She seemed to realize she was asking for less pay, since she was comped *four times* the allowance she’d requested.

“Which would you prefer? Potions or an allow—”

“Potions!”

Wow, that was fast. How addicted to those things is she?

“Noela also demand financial compensation, Master!” Noela insisted.

“Financial compensation? Where the heck did you learn that phrase?!”

Whatever. She mostly wants potions.

It was easy to imagine that Mina was right about Noela wasting money. I knew I probably shouldn’t pay her too much. At the same time, I felt bad that Noela was getting teased by runts who—unlike her—didn’t even work.

“How about this, Noela? When you work hard, I’ll give you 300 rin the next day. As for your potions, I’ll fill them three-quarters as full as usual.” *That way, I can get her to limit her potion intake and convert that to cash.*

“Master will give Noela 300 rin?”

I nodded. “Your potions will be smaller, but I’ll pay you tomorrow for your work today.”

“Garrooo!” Noela’s tail wagged vigorously.

“Now that that’s settled, I’ll make a checklist,” I continued. Whipping out a sheet of paper, I jotted down Noela’s usual chores.

“What this, Master?”

“This checklist will show whether you worked hard.” *Why didn’t I do this earlier?*

“Master fill out?”

“Nope. Mina will.”

Noela flinched.

“When you do well at all the tasks on the list, you’ll get your allowance and potions the next day. Sound good?”

“No! No good! Too strict!” She shook her head furiously.

“Mina’s always kind of picky about stuff like this,” I agreed. “That’s her style.” *Which is why I’m leaving this to her.*

“Noela knows.” Noela sighed. “Master pushover when Noela cuddles.”

“That’s true,” I admitted. “I can’t help myself.”

“Cuddling no work on Mina. Too strong!”

So, she thinks Mina’s tougher than me?

“You hold on to this checklist.” I gave Noela the paper. “If you finish a chore, show Mina. Got it, fluffball? Your allowance will be directly tied to hard work.”

All told, I was just substituting cash for a quarter of Noela’s potion intake. I’d give her a bonus, though, if she worked her hardest for a month. I wanted nothing more than to motivate her.

“Got it! Noela do best!”

She wasn’t kidding. Later on, I thought, *If she keeps working this hard, that bonus will be in her hands at the end of the month.*

I gave Noela her first allowance the next morning, since she did a good job.

“*This* allowance?! Not wad of bills?”

“That’s right. That’s how much your allowance actually is—300 rin. And here’s your potion.”

The bottle I handed her was a little less full than usual.

“Wh-what happen to potion?” Noela demanded, shocked.

“I substituted money for one quarter of it,” I reminded her.

Noela went silent and then looked up at me. “Noela happy with normal potion, Master. No need allowance.”

“Really? After all this?”

Noela’s “financial compensation” hadn’t even lasted a day, let alone a month.

Chapter 2:

The Green Adventurer and the Pharmacist

WOMP, WOMP.

Across the counter, a young man with slumped shoulders sighed. “Haaah...”

His name was Hoost, and he was born and raised in Kalta. We were about the same age—actually, Hoost might’ve been a little younger. I never really befriended him, though.

Just the other day, Hoost left Kalta to become an adventurer. For some reason, he came right back to town.

“Um...could you please stop sighing?” I asked. “You’re really bringing down the mood in the drugstore.”

“I want to become a player, Mr. Pharmacist.”

“Excuse me?”

“I want to be a successful adventurer in some big city and hang out with the hotties.”

I couldn’t believe how idiotically earnest he was being about his goal. “Ah. I see where you’re going. You want me to prescribe a treatment that’ll help you become a ladies’ man.”

I get it. I really do. Hell, I’d love to be popular with girls too. The last time I created something like that, though, things went haywire. I didn’t make that stuff anymore.

Hoost hung his head and shook it side to side. “No, that’s not it. You’re around my age, so I think you’ll understand. I’m not amazing with women, but I have experience between the sheets, if you get what I’m saying.”

So, now he’s going to brag? “Well, isn’t that wonderful?”

As I cringed, Hoost turned serious. “The problem is that I’m fast. Way, way too fast.”

“Oh. *Oh*. I get it.” He was here about *that*.

I understood that it was a hard topic to broach. After all, it wasn't something you really got the chance to tell many other people about. Even if Hoost and I were friends, it wasn't a detail I'd have wanted to know.

"I've heard that women hate *fast* guys," Hoost continued, nodding solemnly. "That's why I came to you. You're known as the greatest alchemist in the land. I hoped you could help me."

"I can't." *What the hell kind of alchemist could fix this? Some kind of sex specialist? It's a biological problem. As for me, er, I'm normal. I think.* "Anyway, how long do you last?"

Averting his gaze, Hoost raised three fingers.

"Huh? Th-three minutes?!" *Jeez, man, of course women are shocked.*

"No...three seconds."

"You've *got* to be kidding!" My jaw dropped. "F-for real?"

"I-I'm sorry! The truth is *two* seconds," Hoost confessed. "I lied to make myself look good."

"Three seconds didn't make you look good!"

"At this rate, women will call me 'Quick-Shooter Hoost.'"

If I didn't know the context, that'd almost sound cool.

"Look," I told Hoost, "I'm not sure I can help with your problem." I had no experience in that area, so I couldn't offer medical advice. "And...hrm...I've never heard of *that* product in this world," I mumbled.

"D-did you have an idea?! I'm willing to spend all the money I earned adventuring!" Hoost nearly threw himself over the counter.

I held him back. "Calm down, Quick Shooter."

"M-my name's Hoost."

"By the way, do you usually wear anything on your, uh, buddy before you do the deed?"

"Nope! I don't wear *anything*. Just my birthday suit!"

Stop acting cool, Quick Shooter. "I figured."

"I mean, no guy puts anything on before they do it," Hoost added.

According to my medicine-making skill, I could make something at least similar to what I needed. I called Noela and Mina into the drugstore. "Could one of you watch the counter for me? Sorry."

"That's all right!" Mina assured me. "Let's watch the store together, Noela."

"Arroo! Leave to Noela, Master!"

"Thanks, ladies," I said gratefully, then headed to the lab. "Quality and toughness will be key."

Hrm...but since these things don't exist in Kalta, won't women think it's odd that Hoost's applying some weird medicine? Nah...it should be fine. Bedrooms are dark. But...wait. If it's dark, how will he see what he's doing?

"Argh! That isn't my problem!"

I just need to make the product, explain it to Hoost, and hand it over. That's it.

Thus, I got to work. These days, we grew almost ten different plants in our meadow, so I rarely had to forage in the forest. It rocked.

"This should be okay," I said to myself.

The test batch in the bottle—a translucent, gel-like liquid—glowed brightly.

Buddy Barrier: Immediately generates a thin topical layer dulling outside stimulation.

All right. Let me try some on my arm.

My body heat immediately transformed the gel; the spot where I applied it became glossy and rubbery, yet soft to the touch. The barrier didn't feel like human skin, but I could peel it off like a scab.

"Whoa." *That's kind of cool.*

All that was left was to figure out whether the barrier was water resistant. I

spread some gel over my index finger. When the gel solidified, I dipped my finger in water and rubbed it repeatedly. I still couldn't feel the barrier dissolving.

"Perfect. It doesn't feel like it'll fall apart or come off at all." *It's plenty resistant.*

Once again, I peeled the barrier off my skin easily. As a material, it was pretty unique, although its uses were incredibly limited.

Heading back to the storefront, I handed the bottle of buddy barrier to Hoost. Mina and Noela were nearby, so I didn't say anything too direct as I explained the stuff to him.

"Amazing! You're the best, Mr. Pharmacist!"

"I'm sure this'll help you get through...battle."

Hoost grabbed my hand tightly with both of his and shook it. "You're like a mad scientist from some top-secret laboratory. You can make anything!" He rushed out of the drugstore, leaving behind all the money he had on him.

He should avoid getting nicknamed "Quick Shooter" now, I mused. But I wonder... Hoost was beyond lightning fast, and the buddy barrier's only going to mitigate the situation. It might only slow him down to lightning fast.

"What did you formulate for him, Mr. Reiji?" Mina cocked her head curiously.

"Er...well..."

Crap. If I actually explained the buddy barrier, Mina would probably yell "Stop making gross products!" Still, no one liked struggling with issues between the sheets. And it wasn't like Hoost could find a solution by consulting a specialist or searching the net.

Detective Mina raised her index finger. "Ah, I know! That man's an adventurer, right?"

"Yup. He's still green, though."

"He must get injured all the time, then. That liquid must be a protective layer to help him prevent blood loss! Tee hee hee!" Mina pointed at me, grinning so widely I felt like I heard a "ta-da!" sound effect.

I responded equally energetically. “Bingo!” *Why wouldn’t he just use a potion?*

“You already make potions, so blood loss is the only reason you’d need to formulate something new, right?!” Mina added. “When he’s injured, he can use that treatment to stop his bleeding and keep germs out of his wound! Correct?”

Let’s just roll with that. “You’re right on the money!”

“I guessed it, Noela!”

“Garroo! Mina amazing!”

The two girls high-fived.

If Mina finds out the buddy barrier’s actual purpose, she’ll probably get even madder because I tried to fool her.

I made a few extra bottles of buddy barrier and put them on a shelf. Mina told customers it was an antibacterial treatment for open wounds.

“That’s right! If you’re bleeding, just spread some over the wound,” she said. “If you drink a potion afterward, you’ll heal nice and fast!”

The buddy barrier wound up selling alongside the drugstore’s potions as a two-step treatment.

Meanwhile, I’d quietly explain its other uses to wives and women with partners, and they’d purchase a bottle discreetly. I assumed they planned to have their partners use the stuff.

I was shocked that so many people were unsatisfied with their intimate lives. Sometimes, it was hard for folks to say what was really on their mind.

Chapter 3:

Culture Shock at the Barbecue

THE PERSISTENT WARM WEATHER was perfect for relaxing in the sun. The temperature made me want to nap, since the drugstore wasn't getting many customers.

Noela sat on my lap, slouching on the counter. She was fast asleep. *I totally get the appeal.*

I cuddled the werewolf girl, basking in her fluffiness. "Her fur's making me too warm...but, man, she's just so soft."

Since Noela started using the shampoo and conditioner I formulated, her fluffiness went up a notch. Honestly, that alone justified inventing haircare products in this world. "They're like steroids for hair," I mumbled, rubbing my cheek on Noela's glossy fur.

"What're you doing to Noela, Rei Rei?"

"Gah!" *D-dang it! She scared the crap out of me. C'mon, Paula.* "Don't sneak up on me like that!" I snapped. "You could at least say hello first."

"I just got here!" Paula retorted. "Is it that much fun obsessing over Noela's fur?"

"You're only skeptical because you've never experienced it yourself. You're missing out," I replied, then narrowed my eyes. "Anyway, let me guess. You're bored, so you came by to chill?"

She returned my look. "Don't take me so lightly, young man. I'm here because I'm planning to hold a barbecue!"

"So, you're here to chill. Got it."

"Aw, don't be such a downer!" Paula sighed. "My shop's dead, and I bet you're in the same boat. So, close up! Let's have a good old BB! That riverbank nearby's the perfect spot to par-tay!"

"What the hell's a 'BB'? You're forgetting the 'Q.'" *Wait. Is it just me, or did she totally sneak in an insult to Kirio Drugs?*

Regardless, it is really nice out, I reflected. Not too hot, not too cold. You could call it perfect weather. And, I mean, it's been years since I barbecued with friends. Wait...have I ever barbecued with anyone but my family?

Noela's ears twitched. She quickly lifted her torso off the counter, her stomach growling. "Noela want BB! Hungry."

"See, Rei Rei? Noela wants in. Besides, it's almost lunchtime."

Almost lunchtime? There's two hours to go. So, if we started prepping the barbecue now, we'd be ready at noon. I bet Paula's been waiting for these exact conditions—slow business, great weather.

Mina came in; she heard our conversation from inside the house. "Well, doesn't a barbecue sound fun?!"

Paula frowned, sulking, and glanced at Mina for support. "Right? But Rei Rei's being a killjoy."

"This is the perfect opportunity, Mr. Reiji," Mina pointed out. "Why not do it? I've, um...never barbecued or anything."

That devious witch is totally dragging Mina into this. She's laying the groundwork for her scheme!

When I looked at Paula, she just cackled.

"Fine!" I snapped. "Let's do it. I'll close the drugstore for now. We'll reopen this evening." I would put a sign on the door for any customers who swung by.

"Cheer up, Rei Rei. I'll get the equipment and stuff ready at my place. Kirio Drugs' team is in charge of getting food! We'll meet at the river in an hour." Paula zoomed out of the drugstore, all keyed up.

"We should probably buy meat," Mina noted.

"Leave meat to Noela!" The werewolf girl raised her nose high.

Whoa. She's serious about this. What a curveball. "Do you know where to get meat?"

"Leave to Noela!" She sprinted out, leaving Mina and I behind.

We looked at each other. "Shall we prepare the vegetables?" Mina suggested.

Just then, Annabelle popped in. “Hey, Pharmacist. I’m here for my potions.”

“Oh, right. The usual, yeah?” I confirmed. “Great timing. I was just about to close up.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Kirio Drugs’ staff is having a barbecue at the riverbank with Paula.”

“Is that so...?” Annabelle cleared her throat, mumbling, “You know...I’m, uh, off work today.”

I could barely hear her, and just as I was about to invite her, Mina interrupted. “Well, isn’t that delightful! Here are your potions, then. See you later!”

She smiled ear to ear as she tried to kick Annabelle out.

The Red Cat Brigade’s redheaded captain scowled at Mina, who returned the look. I could almost see fireworks explode between them. *Man, they really don’t get along, do they?*

“Want to join us, Annabelle?” I asked. “This kind of thing’s more fun with more people.”

“R-really? Well, guess I might as well tag along. Th-thanks for, um, invitin’ me. See you later!” Annabelle tossed her ponytail as she left. Mina pouted angrily.

I need to remember that putting those two together is bad news.

Mina and I got some veggies for the barbecue and prepared them. I’d already closed the drugstore and put up a sign.

“This kind of thing’s so much fun,” Mina commented. “Getting together under the clear blue sky and eating with everyone.”

I found myself agreeing. “Can you fish in that river?” I asked.

“I’m pretty sure you can.”

“Then let’s bring a rod, bait, and some Explosive Mr. Fisher. We’ll cook up any fish we catch!”

“Ah, that’s a wonderful idea!”

Once we finished all the prep work at home, the eager Mina and I headed to the riverbank. Paula and Annabelle were already there, setting up.

“Hey! Already finished?” Paula called. “That was fast!”

“Mr. Reiji gave me a hand.”

“Can I leave the fire to you?” I asked Paula. “I’m going to do some fishing nearby.”

“No problem. I can handle this myself.”

“Thanks.”

I walked along the river, using my sonar skill to find a spot with lots of fish. In retrospect, that was the beginning of the biggest tragedy in the history of barbecues.

Thanks to my sonar skill and Explosive Mr. Fisher, I caught over a hundred fish in just half an hour. *Yeah, that should do it. I know we said we’d leave the meat to Noela... I hope she’s okay getting it.* I thought holding a meat-free barbecue would be a little sad. At least we’d have plenty of tasty fish to go around.

I headed back to report my catch, only to find Mina pacing back and forth. “Where could Noela have gotten off to?!” she exclaimed. “She’s in charge of getting the meat!”

Thunk. Thunk. We heard heavy footsteps. Then a single beast appeared before us. It was Noela in her wolf form; she held a deer in her mouth.

“She...she bagged a deer?!”

“A-amazing, Noela!”

“Whoa! Pretty awesome, wolf girl! I’ll handle dressin’ it,” Annabelle volunteered.

“Radical,” Paula added. “Pork and poultry are way too bland.”

Noela leapt over to me and set down the deer. Her body shone brightly as she changed back into her usual form.

“Noela hunt, Master!” She announced her accomplishment with pride, eyes

sparkling. Her tail wagged happily.

“Good girl!” I praised her, patting her head a few times.

Meanwhile, Annabelle got ready to dress the deer. “Damn, you even drained its blood, wolf girl! I didn’t know you were so thoughtful.”

Watching Annabelle butcher the carcass was kind of scary, so I didn’t look in that direction. Fish and animals like deer were different, as far as I was concerned. *Anyway, we’ve got everything we need now.* “What’s next, Paula?”

“Behold!”

Thonk!

Before us was a griddle. Mina sat in front of it, adjusting the height of the flames. In this world, people used “life stones” with magical power to produce water or fire. The life stones’ magic was kind of like electricity in that way.

“It’s nice and hot,” said Mina. “We should be good to go!”

I paused.

“Master silent. What wrong?”

“What’s up, Rei Rei?”

“Th-this isn’t right,” I stuttered. “This isn’t the BB I know!”

“You’re calling it a BB too, eh?” Paula snickered. “Wait. What’s the problem?”

“‘What’s the problem?’! It’s serious! All we’re doing is cooking meat outdoors!”

Annabelle stopped butchering the deer to look up and nod. “Isn’t that what a BB is?”

“What about charcoal?!” I asked.

“What about it?”

You’re telling me this is what BBs in Kalta are like?! They don’t barbecue with charcoal?! I’m stunned! “Do you ever lose control of the heat and accidentally burn the meat?”

“Of course not. That’d be awful.”

I'm experiencing culture shock after this long?!

"This is lame!" I exclaimed. "Sure, burning food sucks. Still, the thrill of a good barbecue is chilling with friends, eating slightly charred, smoky meat together—with the burnt-to-a-crisp vegetables nobody wants to touch pushed to the edge of the grill!"

Everyone stared at me, eyes wide.

"You're sure getting riled up, Mr. Reiji," Mina said.

"Look, I get it! Using life stones to cook meat and vegetables as always is convenient! But it's not *exciting*. Where's the flavor? That ain't no BB!" I wailed, shaking my head.

"Well, um, I brought salt and pepper. The flavor should be fine," Paula replied.

"That's not what I *mean*!" I was the only one losing my mind. Needless to say, the ladies were puzzled.

"Calm down, Master. It fine." Noela's incredibly fluffy, soft tail stroked me gently.

"Don't worry, Noela. I'm as cool as a cucumber," I sighed.

If we cooked with a life stone, one person would constantly be on fire duty. *That's nothing like how grilling at a BB's supposed to go!* One person cooking the meat was more than enough—we didn't need anyone stuck in other roles, like fire duty. Sure, we could take turns, but it'd waste a lot of time.

Telling everyone I'd be back soon, I retreated from the river, bringing Noela with me.

"What wrong, Master?"

"I need you to fill a box with charcoal, Noela."

"Kay!"

I locked myself in the lab. "I'll show these country bumpkins what a real BB's like! Not that I have much experience with barbecues."

My rage and grief produced my new creation.

Hell Flame: Gel that temporarily increases the flammability of any surface it's applied to.

As I made the hell flame, Noela filled a box with charcoal for me. "This good, Master?"

"Yeah, perfect. Thanks, partner."

"Arroo!"

All right. We shouldn't need to worry about the fire now. All that's left is the grill mesh. I had one at the house that I used to grill fish. It was surprisingly large—almost as wide as my shoulders. I could just bring that. Might as well bring a life stone to spark a fire too.

"What make, Master?"

"A fire treatment!"

"Groo?!" Noela's eyes sparkled. "Wow!"

This is the kind of product I need to make absolutely sure doesn't end up in Noela's hands.

Once we gathered our things, we headed back to the river.

Mina stared at what we brought, bewildered. "Where'd you get off to, Mr. Reiji?"

"I needed to grab some supplies so we could have ourselves a real Q of the BB. Right, Noela?"

Noela nodded for my sake. She obviously had no clue what a real barbecue was like.

"You keep talkin' about real BBQs, Pharmacist, but who cares?" Annabelle said impatiently. "Can't we just cook?"

"I'm trying to tell you, that's boring! Unexciting!"

"Excitement doesn't fill your stomach, Rei Rei."

“Say that after you have a taste.”

Since we were at the river, building an oven was easy. I created a frame from some large rocks, placed the life stone inside, and then inserted the charcoal coated in hell flame.

“At this rate, Rei Rei, our little lunchtime BB’s gonna be for dinner!” Paula whined.

“Just pipe down and watch.”

“No wind’s gonna get through with those rocks in the way, Pharmacist,” Annabelle warned me.

“Just watch. Please.” My hell flame didn’t give a damn about those details. “Noela, get ready for ignition.” She held her hands over the charcoal above the life stone. “Three, two, one!”

“Yup!” Noela released a tiny bit of magical energy.

The life stone reacted, glowing bright red. Soon afterward, the hell flame responded in kind. *Crackle! Crackle!* Orange and blue flames enveloped the black charcoal and spread through the oven.

“Whoa!” the girls cried.

“Amazing! Look how fast the charcoal lit up!”

“Now we can barbecue without one person constantly supplying magical energy!”

“Jeez, Rei Rei,” Paula laughed. “You should’ve told us the drugstore had a product this handy!”

“I just created it a second ago.”

Annabelle, Mina, Paula, and I sat around the flames on large stones, staring into the makeshift firepit. *What is it about fire that makes you want to look into the flames forever?*

Noela seemed to have no interest in that. She stared at the meat Annabelle had just finished butchering. She must’ve been pretty worked up, since her tail was thumping the ground. In fact, she was drooling.

“This, please, Master! Raw fine.”

Right—I forgot Noela can eat raw meat. Why do I have a hunch she’d get sick from it anyway? “Just wait till it’s cooked, will you?”

I placed the grill net over the blazing charcoal, and we were good to go.

“What’s the difference between barbecuing with charcoal and heating a metal plate with a life stone, Rei Rei? I get that we don’t need anyone on magic duty now, but...”

“You’ll know once you take a bite.”

“I’ve never eaten venison before!” Mina exclaimed.

“Me neither,” I replied.

Annabelle carefully explained the various cuts of meat—loin, fillet, thigh, sparerib, and so on. She even gutted the deer for us.

“As far as taste goes, I’d say venison’s a lot like beef,” she noted. “Dependin’ on the catch, you’ll get redder meat, but that tends to be a little gamey. This pink meat’s pretty good. Venison does have a wilder taste than steak...” The more she explained, the more Noela drooled.

“Annabelle, I think Noela’s about to have a meltdown.”

“Please, Red! Deer Noela caught!”

“Ha ha ha! Sorry ’bout that, Wolf Girl. Let’s get to cookin’.”

Mina cleared her throat. “I’ll take the liberty of grilling the meat.” Tongs in hand, she carefully laid strips of loin on the grill one by one.

Crackle! Crackle! The quiet sound of meat cooking filled the air, and thin white smoke rose from the grill. The charcoal smoked the meat slightly, giving it a tremendous aroma.

“These are basically steaks,” Annabelle noted. “I made sure to slice ’em to be easy to cook.”

Ah...this smells incredible! Everyone stared in silence at the venison on the grill. *I bet they’re thinking the same thing I am.*

Watching the meat carefully, Mina seasoned it with salt and pepper. After

letting the steaks cook for a while, she flipped them. Juices dripped onto the charcoal, causing more crackling. Noela gripped her fork, barely able to contain herself.

“First up is...” Mina looked at me.

I pointed to Noela with my chin. “That one’s done, Noela. Go ahead.”

Mina used a clean set of tongs to put a juicy venison loin on Noela’s plate. I loved that she deliberately used different tongs; it was just like her.

Wow. I was curious about deer meat, but once it’s cooked, it really doesn’t look different from beef.

Noela devoured the thick steak in one bite. Cheeks packed, she chewed away valiantly.

“It’s almost like she pulled a vanishing trick with her food,” I muttered.

Noela was clearly in no position to describe the venison’s taste. *But I doubt she lacks chances to eat meat, being a hunter and all. So...*

“Here you go, Mr. Reiji!” Mina placed a thin steak on my plate.

“Ah. Thanks.” The scent of salt, pepper, and fat reached my nose, and my mouth watered. Juices kept dripping off the steak, seeming endless. “Down the hatch.”

I raised a piece of meat to my mouth via the fork express, chewing carefully after the first bite. Unlike beef, venison tasted like something that had once been alive. Fortunately, that flavor wasn’t strong enough to be unpleasant.

That must be what Annabelle meant when she said the flavor was “wild.” The deer meat was way more tender than I expected and not nearly as fatty as it looked at first glance. The smoked flavor rose through my nose. *O-oh. It’s darn good.*

Paula also took a bite and was stunned. “Delicious! This steak’s amazing! Like, seriously!”

“Yeah, this is better than I expected,” Annabelle replied. “It’s tender, and nothin’ about it tastes off. It must be that stuff.” She glanced at the charcoal, which was burning steadily.

Mina grilled more venison; Noela kept jabbing her fork into any finished pieces and devouring them.

“This, um...hell flame? It’s very useful!” Mina commented. “It maintains a strong flame nicely.”

“You can’t put it out, but if you just want to cook something in one go, it might be perfect,” I replied.

The venison was so light, I was able to eat quite a bit.

Noela turned toward me, grease all over her mouth. “Tasty, Master!”

“Which is tastier? My potions or this deer meat?”

She took a moment to think but soon answered, “Both tasty.” She wagged her tail, apparently quite satisfied.

“I’ll have some as well,” Mina said, taking a small piece. She bit into the venison, face lighting up as though she were thinking, *I love calories!*

There was so much deer meat that there was no way we’d finish it all.

“We can take home what we don’t eat and use it in other dishes,” Mina suggested.

Annabelle pointed to a cut of meat beside the grill. “Shanks are best in stews and curry.”

“You’re sure knowledgeable, Annabelle.”

“When you’re a mercenary, you naturally pick up a lot,” she replied, shrugging.

I expected nothing less from the Red Cat Brigade’s captain. *She makes any gesture look cool.*

We grilled and ate meat, vegetables, more meat and vegetables, and fish. We only seasoned them with salt and pepper, but that was plenty.

“It might be a good idea to make some sauce for it at home,” I suggested.

“Oh, I like that idea!” Mina replied. “I’ll think something up.”

“Noela...no more eat.” The drugstore’s resident wolf girl lay on her side,

round as a balloon.

Man, she better not complain about a stomachache later.

“I’m sure stuffed!” Paula exclaimed. “The sound of the charcoal crackling, the smoke, the scent... Great job, Rei Rei. This BB was dang good!”

“Didn’t I tell you so?” I was glad she understood charcoal’s advantages.

“Now then, how ’bout we clean up and head home?”

Together, we gathered all the trash as a bit of post-BB exercise before parting ways.

“We def gotta do this again!” Paula exclaimed.

“I’ll bring my men next time!” Annabelle added.

Both women went home. Mina and I were about to do the same, but Noela still lay on her side, looking miserable.

“Master...”

“What’s up, Li’l Fluff?”

“Belly hurts.”

“I knew it!”

“Groo...”

Don’t even think that moaning’s going to work on me!

I had Mina get Noela some medicine, ultimately curing her stomachache.

“All better, Master! Go home!”

“Yeah, yeah. Let’s go.”

I knew our little barbecue was fun and delicious, but she really had to be careful not to pig out.

Chapter 4:

Kirio Drugs' Work Environment

“DOCTOR?”

“What’s the matter, Ejil?”

It was a nice, peaceful afternoon. I was watching the store with my part-time employee, Ejil, who happened to be the demon king.

“I’ve got a dream, Doctor.”

“Excuse me?” I replied, standing behind the counter and gazing outside.

Ejil looked in the same direction, arms folded. Not many customers had visited the drugstore today, so blather like this was all Ejil and I had to keep us busy.

“I want to peek into a women’s bath,” Ejil said, a distant look in his eyes.

“You call *that* a dream?” *Again with the dumb plans. What is he, a junior high school student on a field trip?*

“I’d like you to create a treatment that lets me look inside one.”

“Ejil,” I said with a distant expression of my own. “That dream only persists because it’ll never come true.”

Ejil flinched. My words were apparently a shock to his system. I felt his passionate gaze on me. “Doctor, by asking you to help, I...I nearly crushed my dream myself!”

That really shook him, I mused. Anyway, what the hell kind of “treatment” could make the walls of a women’s bath see-through?!

According to my medicine-making skill, however, I *could* apparently create some product that’d let Ejil peek.

A treatment to keep him from getting caught, huh?

If I made something like that, Ejil would no doubt use it nefariously. I glanced at him. He stared back with an extremely emotional—and kind of creepy—expression.

However, I was curious about something, so I decided to have the demon king get the materials for the product. “Can you give me a hand, Ejil?”

“I’ll do anything within my power!”

Honestly, Ejil makes a better vassal than a king.

Later, a magic circle glowed in midair, and Ejil immediately appeared from within it. He’d gotten his hands on some rare materials. “Is this everything, Doctor?”

“Yup. Much obliged. As thanks, I’ll make sure to schedule you to work with Noela for a bit.”

“Doctor!” Ejil attempted to passionately embrace me.

I dodged and headed for the lab. “Hey, Noela!”

The door opened, and she trotted in. “What, Master? Making medicine?”

“No, I don’t need help with that. I’d like you to watch the store while I work, all right?”

“Ejil here today.”

“I know, I know. Consider it a favor to me. I’ll give you a fresh potion later.”

“Groo!” Her ears perked up. “Noela work! Put up with Ejil.”

She hates him so much that she has to remind herself to put up with him?
Damn.

Granted, Ejil wore his heart on his sleeve. I was sure he’d strike out with any girl, to be frank.

I watched Noela hustle out of the lab, then started my work. As a business owner, I was wondering about something, and this new product would help clear it up.

Following my medicine-making skill’s instructions, I combined the materials Ejil found with stuff I had on hand. I mixed in the “EX”—or whatever the last ingredient was—and shook the bottle, creating the end product. It glowed as usual.

Super Invisiblize: Makes user temporarily invisible to others.

“Great. It worked.”

No, I wasn’t planning to use this stuff to peek at women in the bath or changing room. I was going to look at something a little more boring—so to speak.

Well, time to give it a try. I sipped the super invisiblize and let it travel through my body for a moment. When I glanced down at my hands and feet, they were still plenty visible.

I cocked my head. “Nothing’s changed. Does this stuff even work?” I wondered, making my way to the kitchen.

“What should we do for dinner?” Mina asked, turning in my direction.

Yeah, she can see me just f— “D-did the door just open on its own?!” she stumbled over her words, looking terrified.

On its own? What’s she talking about? I opened it myself. Wait...does she not see me?

“It’s a ghost! There’s a ghost in the house!”

She, of all people, has no right to say that! I waved my hand in front of Mina’s face. “Reiji to Mina! Can you hear me?”

“Is that you, Mr. Reiji?!”

Okay. So she hears my voice, but she can’t see me wave. It seems like I’m actually invisible.

Now that I’d confirmed the super invisiblize’s effects, I headed into the drugstore.

“Noela, is there a type of guy you’re into?” Ejil was asking Noela. She didn’t answer. “I personally like beautiful, cuddly, sometimes-standoffish women.” He glanced shyly at the werewolf girl over and over.

“ ... ”

She ignored him entirely.

Ejil's attempt to describe Noela didn't charm her at all. Do they always interact like this?

Noela's nose twitched, and she sniffed the air. "Master? Smell Master!"

"Noela, the doctor's in the lab."

Although she couldn't see me, she sniffed again, head tilted. *Noela can smell me, but she's the only one who can.*

Ejil panted. "I...I also want to...to smell *you*, Noela!"

Noela didn't even try to hide the pure hatred in her eyes.

I'm sure folks who are into this sort of thing would thoroughly enjoy this exchange.

"Noelaaaa, baaaby!" Ejil tried to corner Noela but tripped over my foot instead. "Bwah!"

As his full weight crashed to the floor, he slammed into a drugstore shelf, smashing some merchandise. *This is all on you, kid.*

"Master requested. Give Noela fresh potion. But now..." Noela's tail drooped sadly as she looked at Ejil's mess, defeated. She then headed for the living room.

"Noela, darling?!"

If this was how Ejil usually acted with her, no wonder she hated his guts. "You realize Noela despising you is your fault, don't you?"

"D-Doctor! Are you speaking to me telepathically?!" Ejil glanced all over the room.

Not quite, but whatever. "No more sexual harassment. And that doesn't just go for Noela! It goes for Mina and Vivi too. If I catch you doing anything, you're gone immediately."

"Hrmph! You call sniffing her 'harassment'? Laughable!"

Nothing about this is laughable. Stop trying to smell her! "As far as I'm concerned, sniffing her is harassment, period. You better be careful."

"I-If you say so, Doctor."

I should call him the Harassment King from now on. "I'd prefer not to axe you, so show some restraint."

"Yes, sir."

Jeez. "And be sure you clean up this mess."

Ejil cocked his head. "Doctor, do you have some kind of invisibility powers?"

"Master's smell here!" Noela called. She sniffed all over the house. "Smell here for sure!"

I headed back to the lab the long way to avoid her. I had no idea when the super invisiblize's effects would wear off, so I decided I might as well build up some backstock.

Whack!

Noela threw open the door and barged into the lab. "Here!"

She's darn good at this.

She trotted around me sniffing up a storm, paused, and then plopped herself onto my lap as I sat cross-legged. "Garroo? Feels familiar." She turned toward me, tilting her head. "Knew it! Master!"

Our eyes met. *Huh?* "Can you see me?"

"Noela see! But not till now."

"Ah. I get it. This invisiblize stuff only lasts about ten minutes."

Hmm. I figured your average adventurer would love a bottle of super invisiblize; it'd be perfect for helping them flee from a bad spot. On the other hand, if the product made it into the hands of a creep like Ejil, they'd do whatever they wanted with it.

"Not worth the trouble," I muttered, patting Noela.

"Groo?" Noela, obviously unable to follow my train of thought, cocked her head at me.

Hearing Ejil tidying, I popped into the drugstore.

“Ah, Doctor!” Ejil exclaimed. “I heard your voice in my head earlier. You forbade harassment from now on!”

“‘From now on’? I don’t recall allowing it *before*!”

If I was going to maintain an appropriate work environment at Kirio Drugs, then I just might need to keep the super invisiblize under lock and key for now.

Chapter 5:

Heavy Accents Are Hard to Understand

THE ONE GUY in this brand-new world who I unhesitatingly called a friend—Zeral—had this to say when he dropped by the drugstore: “Let’s go drinking tonight, Reiji!”

Drinking? I can’t remember the last time someone invited me out like this! I had no trouble chugging a few drinks. “Sure, sounds good.”

“I’ll swing by this evening, then!” With that, Zeral headed home.

Guess I won’t be eating dinner here tonight. Better tell Mina before she starts cooking.

Assuming that Mina would be in the dining room, I poked my head in and found her slumped over the table.

“What’s up?” I asked. “Sick of haunting the house?”

“Don’t say ‘haunting’! I don’t haunt the house. I’m not a ghost!”

You definitely are. At any rate, it was rare for Mina to exhaust all her... haunting energy?...spiritual power...? so early in the day. I had no idea whether ghosts could run themselves ragged, but I asked, “Are you feeling okay?”

“I wore myself out weeding the backyard.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” Mina sighed. “However many weeds I pull, they just keep growing back.”

Our humble little home did have a backyard. We mostly dried laundry in it, but we had a vegetable garden too. Still, it wasn’t exactly a huge space. “How about I whip up something to make weeding a little easier?”

Mina spun toward me, her eyes sparkling in the light. “Is that possible?!”

“Yup. Hang on a sec.”

I made my way toward the lab, muttering. “I’ve never done yardwork. It never even occurred to me to make something like this.”

I went ahead and mixed Mina's pick-me-up from various lab supplies. "Well, this should do the trick."

Weed Soul X: Kills plants, making weed disposal easy-peasy.

New product in hand, I headed back to Mina. "Hey! Check it out."

"This is your new treatment? What exactly does it do?"

"Just you wait and see."

We exited into the backyard. Mina had obviously been pulling weeds all over, but the spots she hadn't touched were still full of the things. If she left them alone, they'd overgrow the backyard. Only the little vegetable garden was nice and clear—not a weed to be found.

"You know, Mina, I had no clue you were going out of your way to weed the backyard and keep it pretty."

"It's fine, Mr. Reiji. Keeping the property in tip-top shape is my job!" Mina beamed proudly.

Still, I didn't doubt that dealing with those weeds was a huge annoyance. I handed her the bottle of Weed Soul X. "Pour some of this on the weeds."

Mina nodded and did so. The green weeds immediately began to wither. "M-Mr. Reiji, they're dying!"

"That's what this stuff's for." *Wow. I didn't think it'd work so fast.*

We didn't have nearly enough Weed Soul X. I mixed more, pouring the liquid into a watering can to make it easier to use.

"I can finally say goodbye to these dreadful little weeds!" Mina held the can, trembling with glee. "May I?"

"Be my guest!"

With a happy squeal, Mina poured Weed Soul X all over the overgrown backyard. The weeds where she first used the herbicide were already brown. In less than ten minutes, our once all-too-healthy backyard was full of dead

weeds.

“Yay! Mr. Reiji, this is amazing!” The yard almost resembled a beautiful park. Mina seemed delighted. “I’ll finally get some precious time back.”

Thank goodness. Man, if I knew it’d make her so happy, I would’ve created an herbicide sooner. Looking after the yard really must’ve taken its toll. I guess there was just no end in sight.

“All that’s left is to pull the dead weeds,” Mina declared.

Wait a sec. Mina definitely used Weed Soul X on the entire backyard, aside from the veggie garden. However, one spot of roughly knee-high weeds was still bright green.

“Mina, did you forget this area?”

“No! I definitely poured it there.” She repeated the process, tilting her head.

We both hesitated. However long we waited, nothing happened. *What the hell?*

We tugged the weeds. Their roots must’ve been really thick; they didn’t budge, no matter how hard we pulled. “Nrrrgh!”

“What wrong, Master?” Noela tossed a cookie into her mouth and chewed away.

Guess it’s snack time. “Who’s watching the store, Noela?”

“No need watch store. No customers.”

I figured. It doesn’t look like we’ll get any shoppers today, I reflected. Our powerhouse Little Miss Werewolf might be able to yank out these mysterious weeds, though. “Noela, could you try pulling these out?”

“Okay!” Noela licked her cookie hand clean. She trotted over and grabbed hold of the weeds. “Garroo!”

She squatted and pulled with all her might. The ground cracked.

“Wh-whoa!” I gasped. “Incredible.”

Noela shot me a grin, but the weeds were still in place.

“Use your full strength,” I urged her.

Noela nodded. Suddenly, the look in her eyes changed. She breathed deep like some kung fu master, gripped the weeds tightly, and pulled with everything she had. “Gaaarrooooo!”

Oh, man! Just a bit more! “Mina, let’s help!”

“Right!”

I pulled Noela’s waist; Mina pulled on mine. “Graaaaaaaaaah!” we screeched.

Thwump!

All three of us tumbled backward hard. We yelled in pain.

“You okay, Mina?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Noela?”

“Long time since Noela use full strength. Tired.”

Aw, poor thing. Good girl! I thought sympathetically. *Man, these weeds are something else. And Weed Soul X doesn’t work on them either.*

“Y’all got some issues.”

Hearing a voice from seemingly nowhere, I glanced around.

“Right o’er here, young’un,” the voice said.

I followed the sound, only to see something humanoid, with a dark, muscular body, sitting in the backyard. Its face was pitch black, but it had a mouth and eyes.

Who’s that?! Are they human?

Mina and Noela quickly took cover behind me.

“Gosh darn!” the thing exclaimed. “Why’re you folks doin’ this here mischief?” It bent toward us with an exasperated stare, resembling an indignant country bumpkin. The tough weeds we were yanking grew from its head.

Those weeds were this thing’s hair? No wonder Weed Soul X didn’t kill them.

“Never mind, never mind,” the figure added. “I don’t want to hear none o’ them excuses.”

You’re the one who asked us to make excuses! And what’s with that mishmash accent?

“Um...look, this is my drugstore’s backyard,” I told the figure. “Do you mind me asking who you are?”

“Who I *am*? Ain’t it dang obvious?!”

Er...a creepy tuber?

The figure’s eyes widened. “I’m an undergrounder!”

“How the hell were we supposed to know that?!” I snapped. This was my first time meeting an undergrounder. *You’d expect them to live deeper down.*

The undergrounder let out a loud, exasperated sigh. “I’m halfway through my dang hibernation, y’know. How many dang times I got to say it?”

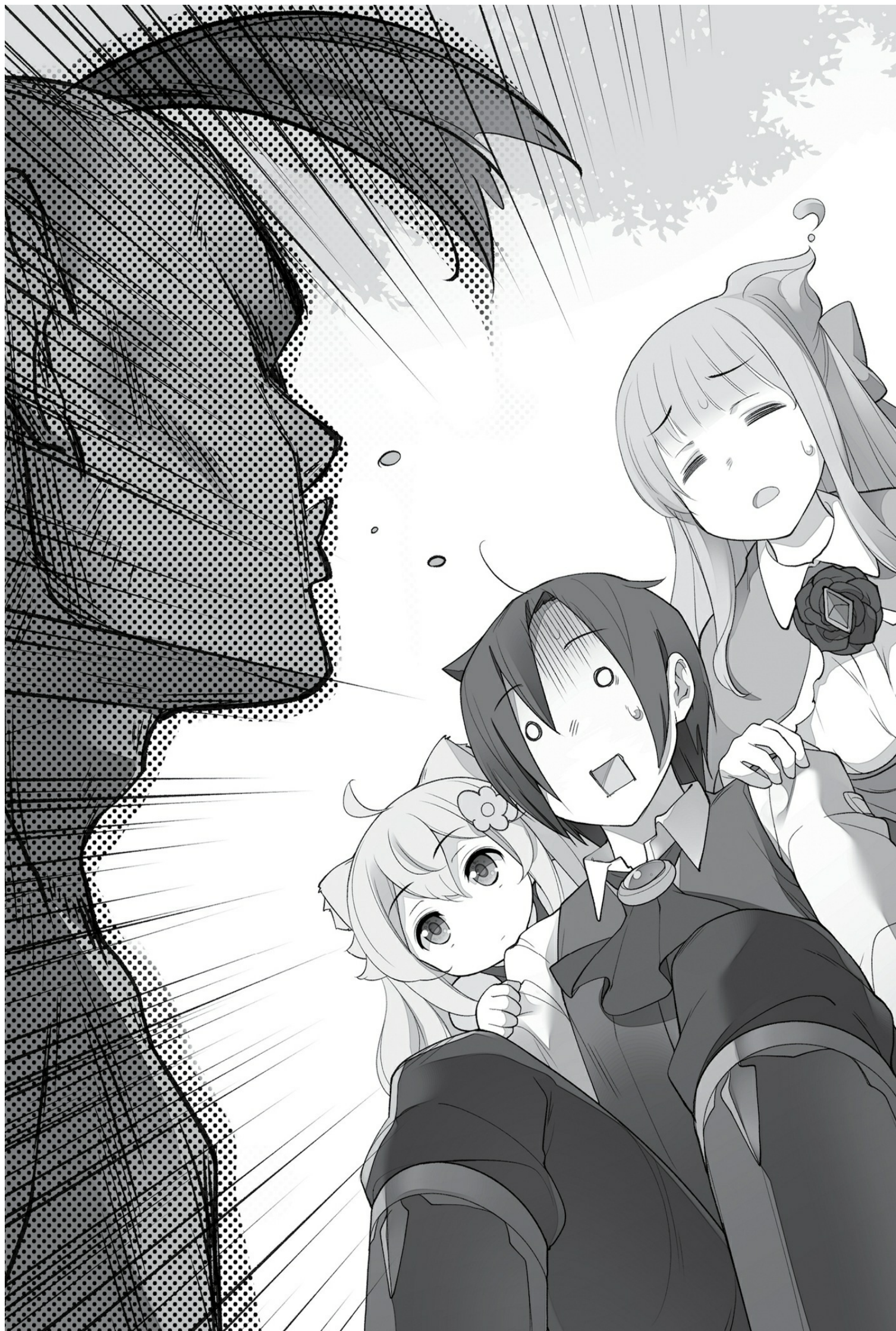
Undergrounders hibernate? You literally only mentioned that, like, just now.

“Ain’t you dang well heard there’re things you dang well ain’t supposed to do?” the undergrounder demanded.

“Frankly, I’m not dang well sure *what* I’ve heard anymore.”

Noela and Mina were trembling with fear at our sudden confrontation with the mysterious undergrounder.

“Well, since this dang old geezer’s so nice, he forgives you,” the undergrounder told me. “Careful next time, though, ya hear?”



“Geezer”? Hunh. So, he is an old man?

Having forgiven our mistake, the burly undergrounder vanished.

“Um...I didn’t understand a single thing he said,” Mina admitted. “I didn’t realize you spoke Undergroundese, Mr. Reiji.”

“Huh? ‘Undergroundese’? Yeah, I guess so.”

“Noela scared, Master. Undergrounders scary!”

Oh, I get it. From my perspective, the undergrounder spoke a mishmash of familiar dialects and accents. To Mina and Noela, who had no experience with different accents, he must’ve come off as a scary old man speaking gibberish.

“He spoke so quickly at first, I thought he was casting a spell!” Mina said.

“Mad because uprooted.”

The undergrounder seemed upset to them, huh? “I don’t really think he was too angry. He said he forgave us. That was probably just his natural inflection.”

There was a large hole where the old undergrounder had been. I stuffed a dead weed in it.

“Noela no pull more weeds,” Noela whispered to herself, cradling her knees with a blank expression.

That old undergrounder really must’ve freaked her out.

I was preparing to close the drugstore when Zeral dropped in.

“Hey,” I greeted him. “So, undergrounders legit exist.”

“Reiji, bro, you doing okay?”

“Yeah. We, like, found one in the backyard today.”

“Like hell you did!” Zeral laughed heartily. “They’re made-up, pal.”

“For real, man!” *I really want to go find that old guy and bring him to Zeral right now!*

Zeral laughed his head off. “Sure you did, suuure you did. Whatever you say,

Reiji.”

Chapter 6:

One-Off Customers Are Usually a Pain

“IS IT TRUE you have potions that keep monsters away?”

We didn't usually get adventurers as customers; this was the first one to shop at the drugstore in a while. He looked about my age—mid-twenties. He was equipped with a leather breastplate, a well-used sword at his waist, and a worn-out bag on his back.

“Uh, yeah, we have a product like that.” I grabbed a repellent bottle off the shelf and brought it to the counter. “This produces an aroma animals absolutely hate. It lasts about half a day.”

“Whoa! That long?!”

Er, yeah?

“W-with this, I might finally conquer that dungeon!”

I figured the main reason adventurers loved the drugstore repellent was that it saved them from risking their lives battling monsters. “Good luck,” I said, getting a bag. “How many repellent bottles would you like?”

“Um...Mr. Pharmacist?”

“Yes?”

The adventurer looked at me gravely. “Please come to the dungeon with me.”

“No way!”

The repellent will pretty much keep you safe, but dungeons are still super hazardous, man! I've lived a slow, relaxed life since I got to Kalta. I'd rather you didn't drag this average Joe into a dangerous spot!

“Come on, don't be like that!” the adventurer pleaded. “Please at least listen to what I have to say.” I really didn't want to, but he started talking anyway. “My name's Stanley, and I'm twenty-six years old. I work as an adventurer in and around the next town over.”

Evidently, Stanley wasn't a solo adventurer. He belonged to a five-person party that fought monsters and hunted for treasure in dungeons.

"Recently," Stanley explained, "they finally noticed."

"Noticed what?"

"That I'm pretty much useless." The word "noticed" implied that Stanley himself already knew that. Apparently, during a meeting, the party's leader told Stanley that his leaving the party would be best for everyone. "I only joined to win Miisha over, but I didn't get close to her at all. I guess she's not really like I imagined."

He reminds me of a college student who joined a club just for the girls. "So... why go explore a dungeon?"

"Well, there's nothing I can do about the party leader's decision. But I figured I'd at least confess my feelings to Miisha."

"R-right."

"I told her that, if I make it back from this dungeon, I want to admit something to her."

It's nice that you're so passionate about your little crush, but this setup's awful. You're raising way too many death flags.

"If I retrieve the treasure in the dungeon's deepest chamber and make it back alive, everyone might see me differently," Stanley concluded. "Miisha may fall for me!"

I could picture the first half of that prediction coming true, but definitely not the second half. Under the circumstances, Miisha was almost guaranteed to be involved in a passionate romance with the party leader.

"Even if that doesn't happen," Stanley added, "maybe I can build my confidence as an adventurer."

His motivation for doing this is sketchy as hell. Still, when he says something like that, it's hard for me to decline. I knew I'd feel pretty safe in a dungeon with Noela around. If Stanley used the drugstore's repellent, though, she wouldn't want to tag along.

“Hff...hff...hff...hff.”

At that strange noise, I turned, only to see Noela wearing what looked like a gas mask.

“Leave to Noela, Master!” she told me.

“Where the heck did you buy that?”

“Paula’s.”

Why does Paula have something like that at her store?

“So, would you care to come on the adventure, Mr. Pharmacist?” Stanley inquired again. “As thanks...” He pulled a withered plant from his waist pouch.

“Whoa! That’s...”

Oronaamsou: Rare and expensive medicinal herb. Used in numerous treatments.

Man, with that oronaamsou, I could make all kinds of products I haven’t been able to yet.

“I’m begging you, Mr. Pharmacist.”

“Can you withstand the repellent wearing that thing, Noela?” I asked. The gas-masked werewolf nodded. “Great.” I turned to Stanley. “If I can bring her with us, I’m in.”

“Of course! Thank you so much!”

Noela and I immediately got to work prepping for our adventure. I called Mina into the drugstore. “Noela and I are going out for a bit!”

“All right!”

I was pretty sure Vivi was scheduled to work at noon. If she and Mina were both around, I figured the store would be fine.

Not long ago, Mina forbade me to do anything dangerous. With the drugstore’s repellent and lure, however, Stanley, Noela, and I could avoid

monster encounters.

Let me just grab some of this...and this... I crammed drugstore products into my bag. Noela stuffed her own backpack with potions. “Hey, Li’l Fluff. You don’t actually *need* that many potions, do you?”

“Groo?!”

“If you’re packing them as refreshments, stop.”

“Arroo...”

She looked so silly with the gas mask on, it was hard to actually scold her. *Darn it, Paula! You only sold her that because you thought it’d be funny.*

With everything packed, Stanley, Noela, and I left the drugstore behind.

Noela transformed into a wolf, and we rode on her back as Stanley led the way to the dungeon. She hated letting anyone besides me ride, but I persuaded her by promising her two potions.

We proceeded deeper and deeper into the woods. *It’s still midday, but it feels so late at night.* Eventually, we came upon a large cave in a massive stone structure. *That must be the dungeon entrance.*

“There it is,” said Stanley.

A group of adventurers were taking a breather at the structure’s base. We also decided to take a break as soon as we arrived, and Noela downed a potion in a single gulp.

I turned to Stanley. “So, what exactly is the treasure in the dungeon’s deepest chamber?”

“Well, it’s *rumored* that something’s in there,” he replied. “But nobody’s ever seen the treasure.”

“Seriously?” Something felt off.

“Yup. All I know is that this dungeon’s deeper than it looks. It hasn’t been fully explored yet, so...”

I was hoping this would be easy as pie. “This is going to be way tougher than I thought. I guess we should be okay with the drugstore repellent, though.”

Sliiink! Noela put on her gas mask. I opened the repellent bottle and left it that way, letting the repellent's aroma waft out.

"I know my way through the dungeon up to a point," Stanley said, lifting his lantern. He led us lower and deeper into the cave.

"Noela bored."

"Don't be like that," I chastised her. "I'd rather we be bored than under attack."

It wasn't like there weren't any monsters or other living things down here. If one showed up, I had a feeling Noela would split like a banana.

"Your repellent stuff's amazing, Mr. Pharmacist," Stanley said. "I haven't seen a single monster!"

"Master's medicine best in universe," the gas-masked werewolf girl told him. "Potions really tasty too."

As we made our way through the dungeon, I grabbed rare medicinal herbs and mushrooms. Thanks to my repellent, this had basically become a super-safe foraging hike.

"All right," Stanley said. "This is *supposedly* the deepest chamber."

It was just a dead end. I certainly didn't see any way to spelunk farther. "Is there...like...a hidden path, or door, or something?"

"There shouldn't be."

"Then how do you know this isn't actually the end of the cave?"

Stanley showed me a book from his bag. "According to this, we should be able to explore even deeper."

That means the book's author got farther than this chamber, I thought.

Just then, I heard water dripping. Looking over, I saw the gas-masked werewolf splashing her feet in a river.

"Cold!"

"You're okay with putting your feet in there?"

“Clean.”

Really? Upon closer inspection, yeah—the river was super clear.

“Think we’ll come across stairs or something if we follow this river?” I asked Noela.

“Stairs over there.” Noela pointed.

I followed her finger. The cavern was dark, but I just barely made out the shape of stairs underwater. *That means this area isn’t supposed to be submerged.*

“Looks like following the river is the way to go,” I said.

“Way to go! Garrooooo!” Noela’s tail wagged excitedly.

“What’s going on?” Stanley asked.

“This river used to be a regular passage. It must’ve flooded somehow. There’re stairs over there.”

“Wow. You’re right.”

Noela jumped in the river. *Splash!* She was completely submerged.

“Hey! Noela!”

After a second, her gas-masked face poked out from the water. “Hole here, Master.”

“Hunh.”

“Blocked.”

“Oh. Now I get it.” *That means it’s my turn.*

It was good that I brought my medicine-making tools. I set to work with the supplies I’d taken with me and the stuff I’d foraged along the way.

“What exactly are you doing, Mr. Pharmacist?”

“Turning that river back into a regular passage.”

The bottle I held glowed, and the new product was finished.

Drain Cleaner: Powerful gel that unclogs drains.

Noela shook rapidly, drying herself off.

“How big’s the drainage hole?” I asked her.

Her fingers formed a circle. “This big.”

Smaller than I expected. Even if I cleared the drain, something would just clog it again eventually. It wasn’t my job to worry about that, though, so I opted not to waste too much time on it. “That hole’s big enough to drain the river water?”

“Something magic deeper in.”

In other words, the obstruction was keeping some magical object from draining the water. The drain was about as big as a bottle mouth; if I opened the drain cleaner underwater and stuffed the bottle into the hole, it’d probably work.

“All right, Noela. You know the deal.”

“Leave to Noela!”

I handed her the drain cleaner. She plunged into the water, then reappeared after a few moments, gas mask and all. I peered at the river, noticing that it was flowing in a way it hadn’t before. The spot where the drain was located glowed faintly. *Must be the magical object Noela mentioned.*

Noela tried to doggy-paddle toward me, but she made no progress whatsoever. “Groo!”

She’s trying her hardest, but it’s not working. The river’s current got stronger, forming a whirlpool. *This is bad. At this rate, the drain will suck Noela in!*

“Take this, beastling!” Stanley tossed her a rope; Noela grabbed on to it, and I managed to pull her out of the river.

Noela’s chest heaved as she panted. “Noela no beastling! Werewolf.”

Leave it to Noela to remember to correct him.

The three of us waited for the river to drain, which doubled as a short break for Noela. The water level dropped and dropped; before we knew it, the

passage was clear. Noela quickly descended into it. She poked at a flopping fish using a stick she found. “Weird fish!”

“I see! This is a magic circle.” Stanley was peeking into the drain. “It appears to enable teleportation.”

“Then the water isn’t flowing elsewhere in the cave,” I realized. “It’s literally teleporting to another location.”

Noela’s eyes sparkled at the various unknown creatures on the floor of the passageway.

“Let’s get going, buddy,” I called. She trotted over, and we descended the stairs.

More magic circles glowed all over the place; the lighting made the whole passage kind of otherworldly. *I wonder if these magic circles work in conjunction with the drain?*

Noela was using her new favorite stick to hit various spots. “Noela excited! Underground dungeon!”

“I’d never normally be able to bring two civilians like yourselves someplace like this, but your repellent made it possible, Mr. Pharmacist,” Stanley said, restating his appreciation of the product’s effects. “I planned to flee immediately if we encountered a particularly tough monster, but it’s like there’re none here at all. It’s truly incredible.”

“All hail the drugstore repellent, huh?”

“Master’s products amazing!”

“That’s right, little werewolf.”

“Arroo!”

At the bottom of the stairs, we came upon an open space with a solemn atmosphere. Farther in, a palm-sized crystal sat atop a pedestal; it had a faint light-blue glow.

Water God’s Orb: One of only a few sacred treasures worldwide.

“Er...that crystal seems incredibly rare.” *I’ve got a bad feeling about this. If we take it off the pedestal...*

“Groo?! Pretty! Noela take!”

I grabbed Noela’s shoulders just as she dashed toward the crystal. “Stay, Noela. Stay!”

“What wrong, Master?” She tilted her head inquisitively.

“That crystal’s what I came to this dungeon for!” Stanley lifted it from its pedestal.

Crap! When did he get over there?!

“With this, I can confess my love to Miisha!”

Just as Stanley finished his sentence, the cave began making noises not unlike an earthquake.

“I knew this would happen!” I snapped.

“Wh-what’s going on?!”

“Master, there! Water sounds!” Noela pointed. A torrent of water was pouring in.

Things are going south fast. “Stanley, let’s get out of here!”

“R-right!”

“You too, Noela!”

“Arroo!”

We rushed back the way we came. Behind us, a blast of water submerged the pedestal instantaneously. The cavern rapidly flooded as we climbed the stairs.

At our current pace, we’re screwed. “Stanley! Throw away the repellent!”

“Huh? But, without that, we’re—”

“Noela can’t use her full power with that stuff around. Noela! I need you to transform!”

“Leave to me!”

Stanley immediately threw the repellent bottle away, and I grabbed Noela’s gas mask. Her body glowed, and she transformed into a wolf. The adventurer and I hopped on her back, and she immediately bolted up the rest of the stairs. The water surged after us.

“You can do it, Noela! When we get home, I’ll give you all the fresh potions you want!”

“Garroo!”

Picking up speed, Noela somehow outpaced the water, returning us to the passageway we started in.

The exhausted Noela turned back into her usual form, reequipping her gas mask. Using the extra repellent I’d brought, we escaped the dungeon in one piece.

A few days later, Stanley dropped in at the drugstore. “Mr. Pharmacist...”

“What’s wrong? You don’t look happy.” *Miisha must’ve rejected him.*

The day we explored the dungeon, Noela and I saw Stanley back to the neighboring town where his comrades made their base camp, and then we split up with him. Since Noela had worked so hard, I gave her bonus potions every morning, afternoon, and evening for a week.

From his bag, Stanley pulled the crystal he’d taken from the cave pedestal. “I’d like you to accept this.”

“Huh? But why?” *That crystal’s supposed to prove he ventured deeper into the dungeon than anyone before him!*

“The rest of my party acknowledged that I reached the dungeon’s deepest chamber. Out of respect for my courage and abilities, they agreed to let me rejoin.”

“Whoa! That’s great!”

“Sure. But I gave Miisha this crystal and confessed my love, like I said I

would.”

I’m guessing that didn’t go well.

“She laughed her head off and told me, ‘I’m not sure what you want me to do with that thing. It’s way too heavy—physically *and* emotionally.’”

Hey, man, happens to the best of us. It’s not like Miisha ever said anything about wanting the crystal.

“Hanging out with that party will be too awkward,” Stanley concluded. “I just want to quit.”

He really is a college student who joined a club just for chicks and got shot down.

“I considered selling the crystal,” he added, “but I wanted to give it to you instead, since I caused you so much trouble.”

“Aw, you don’t have to.” I took the faintly glowing blue crystal in my hands. It was smooth and cool to the touch. *I’m not sure it’s okay to accept a rare item like this...but if he says so.*

“If I hold on to that thing, it’ll just remind me of Miisha’s expression when she laughed at me.”

Please stop talking about that. It’s getting hard to even hear it.

“I think I’m going to look for a new party,” Stanley said.

“Sounds like a good idea to me.” *Frankly, it sounds less like you’ll search for a new party, and more like you’ll search for a new woman.*

“See you, folks.” Stanley left the drugstore behind.

Later, Mina asked me, “What’s that, Mr. Reiji?”

“Let’s just call it a bonus for our hard work exploring that dungeon.”

“It’s beautiful! I’ll polish it and put it on display.”

I have no clue what to do with it. I guess we can hold on to it here till someone who knows better shows up.

Noela poked her head into the drugstore. “Afternoon potion time, Master!”

“Right, right.”

And so, after Stanley’s exciting little adventure, I settled back into my slow, cozy life.

Chapter 7:

The Martial Arts Tournament

I OFTEN SAW Kalta's security force, the Red Cat Brigade, training in a field near town.

"Man, they're sure working hard out there," I said to Mina. We were on our way home from shopping.

My observation seemed to remind her of something. "Oh, right! That's tomorrow."

"What's tomorrow?"

"The big tournament where the Red Cat Brigade will show off the results of their training!"

"Hunh. I had no idea."

A public competition was a great way for the townspeople to get acquainted with the warriors protecting them day in and day out. Plus, we rarely had big events here in the boondocks. The tournament would be a good way to entertain folks. "I bet we could sell potions there."

"Mr. Reiji, your eyes are sparkling!"

"We could set up a Kirio Drugs stall and everything." *I should make sure I bring lots of stock, so if anyone from the brigade gets hurt, they'll be fine.*

"What a lovely idea! Townspeople who don't visit us often will see all kinds of drugstore products."

The stall couldn't display everything Kirio Drugs carried, so I decided I better make a priority list of products to bring. I paused. I could hear battle cries in the distance.

"Hiyaah!"

"Yaaah!"

The mercenaries swung training swords and staves, squaring off in sparring bouts.

“What’s the matter?” Mina asked.

“All guys dream of being strong, Mina.”

“Is that so? Frankly, I prefer a kind Mr. Reiji to a strong one.” I glanced at Mina, who turned bright red, realizing what she’d just told me. She panicked and waved her hands, flustered. “I-I didn’t mean that rudely!”

“I know, I know.”

To be honest, I rarely thought to myself that I wanted to get ripped anymore—not like I used to in junior high.

Among the mercenaries, a single fighter with blazing red hair stood out—Annabelle. She had the eyes of a warrior and the stance to match. Now and then, she let out a battle cry full of energy. It was my first time seeing her like this. Frankly, she looked pretty awesome. *That’s Annabelle at her finest, doing what she does best.*

“Grr... Let’s hurry home, Mr. Reiji!” Mina pulled my arm, rushing me back to the drugstore.

Just when it was time to close that night, Doz—the Red Cat Brigade’s vice captain—swung by. He dragged himself into the drugstore, crouching beside the counter. “Medicine God!”

“What’s the matter?”

Doz looked up as if he was on the verge of tears. “Tomorrow’s the big martial arts tournament.”

Oh—the one Mina told me about. “I heard! I’m looking forward to it.”

“Hey, thanks—ugh! That’s not what I’m here for! Please, make something that’ll increase my strength for a bit!”

“You’re asking the impossible again.”

Despite my exasperation, Doz continued. “The boss cooked for the brigade yesterday.”

“And?”

“I was the only one able to eat it all. It kicked my ass.”

Oof. Rough. Annabelle wasn't the type to cook; Doz must've wanted to acknowledge her hard work by at least cleaning his plate. I understood why he'd go that far. He had feelings for Annabelle, after all. “You're a cool bastard, Doz.”

“Heh heh. You're gonna make me blush!”

“Oh...wait. Come to think of it, I've never made any antidiarrheal meds, have I?”

“I already finished firing everything out both ends.”

“Well, that's good.”

“Problem is, that weakened me a little.”

The proof, Doz explained, was that his sword and spear fighting today wasn't great. His body had expunged the fat and nutrients that should've gone into his muscles. *No wonder he feels weaker.*

“How am I gonna face my men at this rate?”

“You won't be able to show off to Annabelle either,” I pointed out.

“E-exactly.”

“Hold on a sec.”

Leaving Doz waiting, I grabbed a power potion off the shelf. That seemed like the best prescription from what Doz had said. Noela and Mina had drunk power potions when they tried to bulk up. At the time, the potions certainly strengthened their muscles—and, for some reason, gave them fake tans. The beverage's effects were really only temporary, though. Power potions were designed to optimize training and build muscle; thirty minutes and they were done.

But Doz is asking for...

“A buff.” In other words, a product to temporarily increase his combat abilities.

I turned around, glancing at the Red Cat Brigade's vice captain. *Yeah, he looks*

leaner than usual. Is that from losing muscle mass? The tournament starts tomorrow... He's got no time to build more muscle.

"But it's not that you want to *build* muscle specifically," I mumbled. "You basically want to raise your physical attack power."

Thanks to my little outing exploring the cave with Stanley, more adventurers were shopping at the drugstore lately. *I bet a product that increases your attack power would come in handy for that crowd.*

"All right," I told Doz. "I'll have something ready for the tournament."

"You're amazing!" Breaking down into tears, Doz grabbed my hand and shook it fiercely, his nose running.

Gross! Handle your snot before you shake hands!

"Thank you so much! I'm gonna kick some ass!"

"Good luck," I said, seeing him off. *Guess I should hurry up and get to work.*
"Mina, can you watch the store?"

"Of course!"

Swapping places with Mina, I headed to the lab. As I gathered the supplies I'd need, I heard her talking to someone else in the drugstore.

"Eek! What're *you* doing here?"

"Sayin' hello, what else?" Judging by the voice, it was Annabelle. "I was just gonna tell the pharmacist about tomorrow."

"Is that so?" I could hear the edge in Mina's tone. For some reason, she and Annabelle really didn't get along. "I'll let Mr. Reiji know, then. Feel free to leave your message with me."

"I'll tell him myself. Call him for me."

"Mr. Reiji's terribly busy right now." Mina was doing her best not to bring me out there.

Fine, Annabelle. I stopped working for a moment and poked my head into the drugstore. "Hey."

"Ah, Pharmacist!" Annabelle exclaimed.

Mina frowned.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Well, um, it’s about tomorrow. The Red Cat Brigade’s holdin’ a martial arts tournament in town, so come watch!”

“I was planning on it!”

Annabelle looked away, twirling her red ponytail. “You’re always takin’ good care of us and everythin’, so...uh...I’ll bring you lunch. Make sure to eat it,” she mumbled.

She’s being so quiet.

Meanwhile, Mina puffed out her chest proudly. “I’ll *also* be making you lunch, Mr. Reiji.”

When did this become a cooking competition?

“Mr. Reiji will be quite busy handling Kirio Drugs’ stall,” Mina told Annabelle, grinning. “He may not have time to watch any matches.”

But... “Ejil and Vivi are working tomorrow,” I told Mina. “I’m going to have you and Vivi watch the store while Ejil and Noela help me manage the tournament stall.”

“What?! But I wanted to be there!”

“When it comes to running the drugstore, I trust you most. Pretty please?”

“Fine...” Although she disapproved, Mina nodded.

Meanwhile, Annabelle smiled ear to ear. “Thanks for watchin’ the shop, Mina!”

“Grr...”

Yup. They’re at each other’s throats over everything.

“I-I’ll see you tomorrow, Pharmacist.” Saying goodbye quietly, Annabelle left the drugstore.

“I don’t recommend eating her cooking, Mr. Reiji,” Mina warned me. “You’ll get sick.”

“Thanks for your concern, but don’t worry. I’ll handle it.” Mina was clearly displeased as I headed for the lab.

I got back to work and, after a while, finished the new product.

Strength Up: Increases limb strength temporarily, amplifying combat power.

Perfect. This should solve Doz’s problem. But wait... If he’s the only one using this stuff, isn’t that just cheating?

If Doz was going to utilize my new treatment, all the competitors had to have some. It was only fair.

Ejil showed up half an hour before work. Despite being a fearsome demon king, the kid always made sure to get to the drugstore twenty or thirty minutes early, no matter what. I explained today’s plan, and the two of us picked out products to sell at the tournament stall.

“Sorry to make you help when your shift hasn’t started yet.”

“No problem at all. You, me, and Noela...a great group to work at the tournament, if I do say so myself!”

Yeah, right. You know you only care that Noela’s coming along. I kept working with a smirk.

Noela took her time eating breakfast. When that disobedient fluffball finally arrived at the store, Ejil and I were holding the lunches Mina made us; we’d already finished preparations for the stall.

“Good luck out there!” Mina waved.

We waved back and left the drugstore.

The town’s biggest plaza served as the tournament venue. In its center was a classroom-sized ring surrounded by fencing.

I brought ten of the drugstore's bestselling products. We set up our tent in a corner and began arranging the merchandise as if we were in a marketplace.

Paula noticed us and trotted over. "Howdy, Rei Rei! What's the deal?"

"This'll be a big tournament, right? I figured I might as well capitalize on that free publicity."

"Oho! Well, aren't you the businessman?"

"Your tool shop isn't doing anything like this?"

"Nah. Too much hassle."

What a shame. If she'd set out some swords or mantles, I imagined they'd definitely sell. *Paula is forever Paula.*

"Noela, were I to defeat all the humans in this tournament, would you fall in love with me?" Ejil inquired.

"No." Noela was brutal as always.

Ejil turned to me. "Lately, Doctor, I've come to enjoy Noela's put-downs."

"Then you're already a lost cause, Ejil," I retorted. *Still, he's ever the optimist.* "Anyway, this tournament is for the Red Cat Brigade to show off how hard they trained. Outsiders can't take part."

"Oh. That's unfortunate." Ejil gazed at the crowd gathering as he prepared change for customers.

The best thing about Ejil was that he often paid attention to things I missed. He was always ready when something happened. *I'd expect nothing less of the demon king. Honestly, though, he'd be a better aide or advisor.*

As townsfolk gathered in the plaza, more stalls popped up.

"M-Master! Master! Candy apples! Candy apples!" Noela, extremely agitated, pulled at me with absurd strength.

"Whoa! Hold your horses."

"Leave stall to Ejil! No problem!"

"My word, Noela!" the demon king exclaimed. "I didn't realize you trusted me

so much!”

“Trusted”? Nah. She just suggested you because she knows you’re good at your job.

Noela and I made our way to the candy apple stand.

“Oh!” exclaimed the vendor. “Well, if it ain’t the pharmacist and Li’l Wolf!”

The little wolf known as Noela raised two fingers. “Two!”

“You got it!”

But I didn’t ask for one. Oh, well. Those things were tasty, but they filled you up real quick.

I paid the vendor, and he passed our candy apples to Noela. She licked away the “candy” part with absurd speed. Once she finished chowing down on the fruit, she started eating the second candy apple.

“You’re having *both* of them?”

“Groo?” Noela tilted her head, then sniffed the air and pointed in another direction. “Master! Meat!”

“I get it, I get it.” I passed her a thousand-rin bill. “There’s your allowance. Go have fun.”

“Uh-huh!” Noela’s eyes sparkled. She disappeared into the waves of people.

Meanwhile, back at Kirio Drugs’ stall, Ejil seemed to be handling customers in his own *unique* way. “Bwa ha ha ha! Listen well, pitiful humans! These treatments—”

A passerby interrupted. “Oh, Kirio Drugs is here today? You guys are sellin’ stuff?”

“C-correct! Bask in the good doctor’s kindness!”

Why’s he acting all high and mighty? Fortunately, our customers knew Ejil could be like that; I didn’t think it would cause issues at the stall. I decided to go pass out strength up to the mercenaries while I had the chance.

“M-Medicine God!” Doz dragged himself over. “Y-you made the treatment I asked for?”

“Yup.” I smirked.

Doz smirked back. “I knew you’d come through!”

“You flatter me.”

I handed Doz a single bottle of strength up, and he downed it. He clenched his fist, and his arm and shoulder muscles bulged in a way they definitely hadn’t yesterday.

“Wh-whoa! This is somethin’ else!”

“Wow! Looks like it’s working.”

“Check me out, Medicine God! I’m today’s star!” Doz exclaimed. “Now I should be able to fight without embarrassin’ myself in front of the others. I can show off to the boss too!”

“Go knock them dead...but not literally.” I smiled contentedly, gazing into the distance. *Hope things go well for him. Now, then...*

I eventually handed out strength up to all the Red Cat Brigade members I recognized. The mercenaries would serve as my guinea pigs. They quickly agreed to try the new product after I explained that it’d temporarily increase their combat abilities, so I told them to drink the mixture before heading to their matches.

This was an elimination tournament; each mercenary had to fight their way to the finals. The first matches were booked randomly. Once those finished, the winning participants’ names would be written into the next slots.

Is Annabelle not participating?

At least, that’s what I wondered until I looked at the final match bracket. The winner of the entire tournament earned the right to challenge Annabelle.

They’re treating her like the defending champion, huh?

Finally, I found the redheaded warrior herself. “Hey, Annabelle.”

“H-hey, Pharmacist! You’re watchin’, huh?”

“Mm-hmm. Oh—here’s a new drugstore prototype. Try it, if you want.” I explained the strength up’s effects to Annabelle. She raised an eyebrow,

examining the bottle suspiciously. “I gave everyone some,” I added. “So...”

“Hrm.” She stuffed the bottle into her pocket. “Thanks. I’ll try it.”

Soon, the tournament’s first round began, and the townsfolk surrounding the fenced ring cheered, giving the plaza a lively atmosphere.

“So, um, I made you lunch,” Annabelle told me. “Want it?”

“You said something about that yesterday! Yeah, absolutely.”

“G-good.”

I told her where Kirio Drugs’ stall was, and she ran off. I still had the lunch Mina packed too—but with Noela the black hole around, nothing would go uneaten.

“Yaaargh!”

I heard a loud, throaty battle cry from the ring. *Ah, Doz is in the middle of his match.* The Red Cat Brigade’s vice captain swung his log-like staff overhead, intimidating the hell out of his opponent. *Dude’s like a pro wrestler.*

Doz grinned at his enemy as if asking, “What now?” However, his opponent refused to back down. He let out his own battle cry, swinging two heavy-looking metal staves with both hands.

Doz’s eyes widened at the unexpected response. “Wh-what’s with your strength?! This ain’t fair!”

“I got me a prototype treatment from the Medicine God, ya see!” his opponent replied. “Sorry, Vice Cap, but I’m winnin’ the right to get my ass handed to me by the boss!”

So, he assumes he’ll get whooped?

“W-wait!” Doz protested. “That treatment was just for me!”

No, it wasn’t, Doz. You requested that I create a product to make you stronger, not to make sure you win. Semantics, maybe, but I felt I was well within my rights.

“D-doesn’t matter!” Doz yelped. “I can’t afford to lose! The boss’s gonna kick my ass!”

Yup. They all assume Annabelle will beat them.

“Graaaaaugh!”

The powerful battle between the two warriors started in earnest. Eventually, Doz emerged as the winner, although he was black and blue. After the match, I gave both men free potions. “Here you go, guys. From Kirio Drugs.”

“Whoa! A potion from Kirio Drugs is enough to heal your wounds instantly!”

“Uh-huh! They’re tasty too!”

“What a refreshin’ flavor!”

“I ain’t never drinkin’ a regular potion again!”

“I can’t believe they’re so cheap either!”

“What? They’re a thousand rin cheaper than normal, for today only?”

“We’d be idiots not to head to the stall and buy a bunch!”

Sheesh. This match was sponsored by Kirio Drugs.

The festivalgoers were amped up in every respect, and those who wanted to try Kirio Drugs’ potions followed Ejil’s loud cackling to the stall.

Later, Ejil found me and informed me of a problem. “We’re about to sell out of potions, Doctor.”

“I figured.” I was hoping to give the tournament attendees a sense of what products the drugstore sold, so I focused on bringing a variety of stuff. The trade-off was that I hadn’t brought much stock of any product in particular.

“Noela?”

A shadow wove through the crowd, approaching me. “Call Noela, Master?”

The werewolf girl had fried squid in one hand and a meat kebab in the other. She chewed loudly, some kind of sauce all over her mouth.

“I did indeed.” *I see you’re having a good time.* “We’re running out of potions. I need you to zip back to the drugstore and bring over two hundred more bottles, as quick as you can.”

“Uh-huh. Leave to me.” Finishing her squid and kebab, she transformed into

her wolf form and sped out of the plaza.

She probably won't take longer than twenty minutes. I say it a lot, but she really is useful.

Meanwhile, Ejil was explaining the remaining potions' significance to our customers. "I offered the good doctor *half the world* in exchange for potions like these, yet he refused me!"

Oh, right. That did happen.

"Do you humans understand what that means?! Do you understand the potions' preciousness?!"

"We're selling them because we want people to see how *precious* or whatever they are, idiot!" I snapped. "Enough with the speeches. More with the selling, please."

"Oh, right. My apologies," Ejil mumbled.

Meanwhile, the scheduled matches continued in the ring. Judging by his bracket, Doz only needed to win one more match to reach the tournament's top spot. The guy was breezing through the competition with his giant log of a staff, so I was sure he'd have no trouble winning.

The wave of customers at Kirio Drugs' stall thinned out around noon, and I decided to eat Mina's packed lunches with Ejil.

"That foul woman seeks to steal your heart through your stomach," Ejil muttered. "How conniving."

"Seriously, who do you think I am?" I said.

"Still, you know what?" Ejil continued. "This is delicious. I'd love for that woman to handle meal planning at my castle."

"I have a hunch that all kinds of weird dishes are served there, huh?"

"Correct," Ejil said with a sad—almost despairing—smile.

"Ahem!" Annabelle cleared her throat in front of the stall. She held a basket in one hand.

"You brought me lunch, right?" I greeted her. "Let's have some."

“Right,” Annabelle murmured. “But, um, no need to force it down if you’re full already.”

“Nah, I’m not all that stuffed. I left some of the lunch I brought for Noela.”

“O-oh...okay,” Annabelle replied even more quietly.

Ejil was staring at the Red Cat Brigade’s captain since she arrived at the stall. Now he pointed at her. “T-temptress! Are you in love with the good doctor?!”

Stunned, Annabelle grimaced and narrowed her eyes at Ejil.

“Something’s fishy,” Ejil continued. “You went out of your way to cook the doctor a meal, and now you’re here bringing it to him.” My fist came down on Ejil’s head. “Yeooow!”

“Shut up, would you?” I snapped. “Sorry about this idiot, Annabelle. He tends to ramble about nonsense.”

“No...it’s all good.” Annabelle’s quiet voice was slightly panicked. She looked down, her face beet red. “This way.”

The redheaded captain led me toward a bench just outside the main plaza. Unfortunately, another couple had taken over the spot.

“Argh! This was the best place.” Annabelle sighed. She circled around to other spots, but—this being a one-horse town with few events—they were all occupied. Although she hadn’t yet fought an opponent, Annabelle looked like a defeated warrior. “There’s nowhere to sit and eat.”

A few Red Cat Brigade members who were already knocked out of the tournament came over to check on their captain.

“Is the boss all right?”

“No way.”

“Hell, no! I bet her heart’s racin’ a mile a minute!”

You guys are noisy as heck.

Taking a quick look around, I spotted an open spot beneath a tree, and Annabelle and I headed over there. I spread my handkerchief on the ground for her. “Come sit down.”

“Huh? But...”

“I’ll be fine. A few pats and my pants will be clean.”

“Th-thanks.” Annabelle sat on my handkerchief shyly. I plopped down next to her.

The peanut gallery chattered away.

“This is really something. Look at her expression!”

“She’s got it so bad.”

“*Wicked* bad.”

“The boss’s pining away!”

Annabelle didn’t hear any of the comments. Still, the fact that her men were so worried spoke volumes about their respect for her as captain.

For lunch, she made a bunch of sandwiches; I ate a few of them.

“I-I’m sorry,” Annabelle mumbled. “I know I’m not a good cook, like that woman you live with.”

She must be talking about Mina. “Hey, these sandwiches are seriously awesome.”

“R-really? Thank goodness.” Annabelle kept looking away. She scratched her cheek. “I actually tried to make way more, but I’m so bad at cooking that less than half came out all right.”

“You know, since you’re captain of a mercenary brigade, I always thought you’d be way scarier,” I told her.

“W-well, sorry for being unfriendly.”

“But you can be pretty cute sometimes, huh?”

Annabelle turned bright red once again.

“Is the Medicine God trying to kill her?!”

“Is that what they call *flirting*?”

“I’d be all right with leaving her with him.”



The peanut gallery was as chattery as ever.

On the other hand, Annabelle was now dead silent.

“Er...did I say something wrong?”

“Boss!” Having won the whole tournament, Doz was bellowing into the air. “I did iiiiit!” The strength up’s effects were still active, so he’d face Annabelle in his powered-up state.

“Big bro Doz totally ruined everything,” a peanut-gallery mercenary muttered.

“That’s why he ain’t never gettin’ a girlfriend.”

“I’m jealous. He gets a special sparrin’ match with the boss.”

Pat! Pat! Annabelle slapped both her cheeks. “Thanks a bunch, Pharmacist. I’ll go deal with that lug.”

“Good luck!”

“Who do you think you’re talkin’ to? I don’t need no luck.” Annabelle smiled ironically and headed for the ring.

Noela wobbled over and grabbed my legs, exhausted. “Tired, Master.” Having delivered the potions to Kirio Drugs’ stall, she was finally catching her breath.

“Nice work, buddy. Want to go watch Annabelle’s match?”

“Watch!” The crowd thickened, and since she was short, Noela couldn’t see much. I sat her on my shoulders. “Arrooo! Can watch, Master!”

“That’s the point.”

I understood that Noela had nothing to hold on to, but it was kind of a problem when she covered my eyes. *I can’t see anything!* Then she moved her hands, hugging my head and actually letting me watch the match.

In the ring, Annabelle and Doz stared each other down. In Annabelle’s hand was a wooden sword; in Doz’s, a huge log.

“Doz.”

“Boss!” Doz bellowed.

Wait. Annabelle, did you...

The opponents took combat stances, and the crowd cheered loudly.

“B-boooooss!”

Doz swung the giant log toward Annabelle, and she nimbly dodged. The vice captain repeated the move three times in a row before Annabelle unleashed a dizzying slash attack with unbelievable speed.

“How many times did she strike just now?” I asked Noela. “Three?”

“Master wrong. Seven.”

For real? Annabelle’s tough as nails.

“Hey, Doz!” Annabelle taunted. “You got the pharmacist to make that weird treatment, and this is the best you’ve got?”

“H-how do you know about—”

“Men are idiots who think muscles make you strong!”

Er...is that wrong? Don’t muscles equal justice?

Doz’s log kept missing its target, and Annabelle let another devastating attack rip. “However much you juice yourself up, it don’t mean jack if you can’t hit your enemy!”

“Ergh! Thanks...for...the punishment.” Doz collapsed to the ground alongside his giant weapon.

“I knew it.” I let Noela climb off my shoulders. “Annabelle didn’t use the strength up.”

“Groo?”

“I gave her a bottle, but—”

In the middle of my explanation, the woman of the hour came over. “Sorry for all the trouble my vice captain caused you, Pharmacist.”

“It was nothing at all. I wanted to experiment a little anyway.” And thanks to Doz’s good word of mouth after his first match, Kirio Drugs’ stall did tons of business. “You didn’t use it, did you?”

“Ah, it’s not that I don’t trust your products or anythin’,” Annabelle assured

me. "I figured I could beat Doz without it, though."

That just proves her confidence in her abilities, I mused.

"But if somethin' real bad ever attacks the town, I know your products will protect us all," Annabelle added.

"You know, this was my first time seeing you fight," I told her. "You were awesome out there."

"Right?" Annabelle smirked. "That's the point of this little tournament—for the townsfolk to see what the brigade can do, and that we ain't just sittin' around eating their food for nothin'. It's our way of winnin' their trust."

Hearing her men calling her, Annabelle headed off.

"Red super cool," Noela declared.

"Agreed."

Of course, thanks to the martial arts tournament, Noela got hooked on swordplay. She swung her favorite stick around like a blade for the next few days.

Chapter 8:

An Adult Palate

“THAT SHOULD do it.”

I’d just finished creating a handful of perfumes. Until now, Kirio Drugs only sold one scent. Apparently, that wasn’t nearly enough for our female customers, so I started making more as soon as I could.

Learning that the drugstore needed more scents was quite simple. I’d recently installed a request box, and—after three days—I found that anonymous suggestion inside.

The request box was Mina’s idea. “I think people might be reluctant to tell you directly about plenty of issues,” she’d said, explaining the concept. “They might want a treatment they can’t tell you about face-to-face because you’re male.”

“Hey, Mina? I made the new perfumes,” I called. “Come give ’em a whiff.”

Mina popped into the lab. “Wow! I already smell all sorts of things from here.”

She came over, and I revealed the perfume bottles. “Five new aromas on top of the usual one!”

Mina stared at the prototypes with glee in her eyes. She picked up a small bottle of perfume and smelled it. “Ah...! This one’s refreshing and a bit sweet.”

“I used citrus peels as its base.”

“I see!” Mina grabbed another bottle. “This one’s, um... Well, it reminds me of a flower.”

“Bingo. I made it by combining fruit blossoms with other flowers.”

“Ah! Wonderful.” Mina sniffed the third bottle, tilting her head. “Um...I’m sorry, Mr. Reiji. I’m not quite sure what this is.”

“Wait. Seriously?” *You mean it doesn’t smell like anything?*

I took the bottle so I could smell the perfume.

“Wha...? That really *doesn't* have a specific scent,” I agreed. *Why not?*

For the record, the perfume did *have* a scent. I just couldn't distinguish it. In light of that, I decided to have Noela smell it. She was in the drugstore.

“Noela?” I peeked in.

Noela was slouched over the counter, asleep. *You're supposed to be working, Noela. There's even a customer!*

Specifically, it was Mikoto from the town nearby. She was an energetic young woman—probably fifteen or sixteen years old—with loose, wavy black hair. She swung by sometimes to shop or play with Noela.

“We're lucky it's just her,” I muttered.

Mikoto tilted her head inquisitively at me. “What's kicking, Mr. Manage-Man? Something wrong?”

“That's Mr. Manager to you, young lady. Our resident fluffball's being a pain. She isn't even trying to wait on the customer—you, I mean.”

“No big! I like pinching her cheeks on the sly whenever she's asleep. It's all good!”

That'd definitely annoy Noela if she were awake. “Wait. You mean, this isn't the first time Noela's slept on the job?”

“Oh, crap.” Regret swept across Mikoto's face. “Every time she wakes up, she begs me not to tell you, so... Tee hee hee!”

In exchange for Mikoto not tattling, Noela gave the girl tacit permission to enjoy pinching her soft cheeks. I sighed deeply. Still, the timing of the young townswoman's visit worked out in my favor.

“Do you recognize this scent?” I asked, tipping the perfume bottle toward the girl in front of me.

“Let me see.” Mikoto brought her nose close to the perfume and sniffed. Her eyes sparkled. “Ooh! I don't recognize it, but let me tell you, it's really refreshing—like walking through a forest or something!” She kept sniffing at the

bottle. Apparently, this scent was a hit with her.

“That’s what I expected,” I replied.

I actually made this perfume’s base from plants and leaves; the idea was that it’d smell revitalizing. For some reason, though, it hadn’t smelled that way earlier. That was bizarre, since I’d definitely smelled foliage when I was creating it.

“I wonder why...”

“What’s wrong, Mr. Manage-Man? You look like you just ate something sour.”

I told Mikoto what transpired in the laboratory.

“Oh!” she nodded. “I might know what happened. You know how, when you eat something really flavorful, then something lighter, you don’t really taste the second food?”

In short, Mikoto thought the reason I couldn’t smell the perfume properly was that my nose got too used to stronger aromas. “You might be right.”

If strong scents keep customers from smelling the differences between the drugstore’s perfumes, that’ll be a problem. I went out of my way to create more scents, but this would render that moot.

Come to think of it... I wasn’t exactly used to perfume shopping, so it hadn’t occurred to me at first, but perfume counters on Earth typically had something on hand that reset customers’ sense of smell. “Coffee beans,” I recalled. “But do those even exist in this world?”

“Kohfee beans? What’re those?!” Mikoto asked.

Knew it. But wait...what if it’s just not called “coffee” here?

Either way, I’d yet to smell or see coffee since arriving in Kalta. That meant that commoners, at least, didn’t know what the stuff was. “Mikoto, could you get me some deodorizer?”

She nodded, grabbing a bottle off the shelf.

She’s watched the store with Noela before. She really knows her way around here, huh?

“Much obliged,” I said, grabbing the deodorizer and sniffing its contents. It didn’t actually have a scent. “Now, what happens if I smell the perfume?”

I sniffed the bottle. *Nope. Still no good. Darn!*

The deodorizer’s primary use was *erasing* scents; most customers bought it for their washrooms. It made sense that it didn’t return my sense of smell to normal. “I guess I’ve just got to make a formula that smells similar to coffee,” I concluded.

“You sure seem fired up.” Mikoto squished the slumbering Noela’s face repeatedly.

“Could you watch the store for me, Mikoto?”

“You know I don’t work here, right, Mr. Manage-Man?” she retorted, but she planted herself next to Noela nonetheless. We wouldn’t get many customers for a while, so she’d be okay.

Returning to the lab, I found Mina on the verge of tears, sniffing the other four perfume bottles. “Mr. Reiji! I c-can’t smell *anything* anymore!”

“Don’t worry. I’m in the same boat. It’ll be all right.”

“Nothing about this is all right! You *finally* acted on my request for more scents, and now this happens!”

So, Mina submitted that request. When I thought about it, she’d asked me to make more perfumes a while ago too. If I remembered correctly, I just cocked my head in confusion and asked something like, “Why do you need so many?”

I’m so dense sometimes. Mina hadn’t wanted to force me to make new scents, so she hadn’t pressed the issue. Still, she clearly wanted variety; that was why she had me set up the request box.

“I’m going to create something to help us tell scents apart again,” I told Mina.

“You’re a genius, Mr. Reiji. Let me help!”

This time around, Mina worked as my lab assistant. Hoping to make something that smelled similar to coffee, I grabbed herbs, flowers, fruit, tree bark, and even citrus peels. I adjusted the quantities as if the mixture were a coffee blend. “Done!”

Fragrance Cleanser: Liquid with an aromatic, bitter, slightly sour odor.

Since the liquid was mixed from all kinds of things, it was dark brown—nearly black, actually. *It sure looks the part.*

I sniffed the fragrance cleanser as a test. “Whoa! It really does smell like coffee.”

Mina also took a whiff, tilting her head at the unfamiliar scent. “Does it smell right, Mr. Reiji? It’s certainly aromatic, but...”

“Heh!” I chuckled, getting on a high horse. “You can be such a child at times.”

Sniffing my new creation again, I looked down condescendingly at the young lady who didn’t appreciate the mature scent of coffee. I smelled one of the perfumes, then another. As the fragrance cleanser’s effect faded, I sniffed it again and proceeded to the third perfume. *No problem smelling it!*

Mina copied my actions. “Ooh! Mr. Reiji! I smell this just fine!”

“If you ever find yourself getting used to a particular aroma and having trouble telling other scents apart, one whiff of this fragrance cleanser will reset your sense of smell.”

“Amazing!” Mina clapped. Being unable to enjoy the new perfumes must’ve devastated her.

In the drugstore, I put the perfumes on display in a sealed case to ensure their scents didn’t interfere with other products. Just like that, the one scent the drugstore carried became six. Of course, I set the fragrance cleanser right beside the cabinet along with instructions on how to use it.

Mikoto had left a note on the counter that read, “Headin’ home!”

She must’ve been bored out of her mind. Wait...when did she even leave?

A few days later, Elaine—aka Drills—dropped in.

“We have more perfume in stock, Elaine!” Mina exclaimed.

“Really?!”

Mina stood in front of the perfume cabinet, eyes sparkling as she explained the new scents to the equally giddy Elaine. “If you start having trouble telling the perfumes apart, just sniff this,” she said, gesturing at the fragrance cleanser.

Elaine sniffed the mixture. “Ah—I can smell again! Sir Reiji is incredible!”

The girls were pleased as punch. Since Elaine was over the moon, even her butler, Rayne, smelled the new perfumes and tried the fragrance cleanser. “Oh my,” he said with a surprised expression. He peered at me for a moment before leaning in and whispering, “How much does this ‘fragrance cleanser’ cost?”

“I see that you, too, have discerning taste.”

Rayne grinned, nodding as the ladies chattered and laughed. “Indeed.”

“Awesome.”

When I explained that the fragrance cleanser was basically still a prototype, Rayne quietly slipped a request into the drugstore’s request box, looking me in the eye and nodding.

I guess a mature palate is the same, regardless of which world I’m in.

Just as I expected, Rayne requested a proper retail version of the fragrance cleanser.

“That old butler totally gets the appeal of coffee’s scent,” I murmured, “but I wonder whether other ladies and gentlemen will.”

I definitely could’ve sold the fragrance cleanser right away as a nasal medicine and air freshener for the house. “Could I turn it into actual coffee...?”

I decided I might as well try to whip up a drinkable version, regardless of whether folks would enjoy it. Today, I was on store duty with the lake spirit, Vivi; I took all kinds of notes during my work hours.

“I need to make sure it’s still technically a potion.”

“Reiji, is something the matter?” Vivi tilted her head.

“I’m thinking about creating a drinkable version of the fragrance cleanser I

made the other day,” I replied.

“I don’t think that would sell very well.”

“Why not?”

“It’s bitter black water.”

“Heh!” I got on my high horse again. “Foolish child.”

“Why would customers want to drink something like that?” Vivi insisted. “I’d rather you made another tasty juice, like your potions.”

“Hey, I run a pharmacy, not a juice bar.”

“Boo!” Vivi cried, frowning.

“Watch the drugstore for me,” I instructed her. “I’m going to go make a prototype.”

“Uh-huh.”

I toiled away in the lab, selecting ingredients and trying different mixing techniques while taking notes.

Suddenly, I heard a voice from the storefront. “Reiji’s lost it, Mina.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s trying to make bitter drinking water!”

“Uh...” Mina hesitated. “Um, to be honest, I’m a bit confused about that too. Why would he ever want to drink that fragrance cleanser?”

“Right? He’s so weird.”

Those young ladies just can’t comprehend an adult’s fine palate. “True relaxation takes the form of a hot cup of joe,” I muttered to myself.

Noela entered the lab. She was bored of hanging out in the living room; it was her day off, but she’d stayed home the whole time.

“Something wrong?” I asked.

“What making, Master?”

“A drinkable version of the last product I created.”

Noela's ears perked up excitedly; her eyes sparkled with curiosity. "Groo! Tasty?!"

"Well, this specific taste might be a little much for you right now." *She'd definitely say it was too bitter.*

"Garrroooo!" Annoyed by my condescension, she puffed her chest out. "Noela strict about tasty!"

"All right. You'll be pretty surprised when you try this."

"Noela excited to drink, Master!"

Noela put on her most critical expression and hung around, waiting to judge my new creation. Sniffing the air, she narrowed her eyes. "What that, Master? Weird smell."

"See? This is going to be too much for you." Vivi had described the aroma as "bitter water," and the first time I drank black coffee, that was frankly how I'd felt about the flavor.

"Arroo?"

"This is the kind of beverage you only appreciate as you get older, Li'l Fluff." I stroked my nonexistent beard.

Noela didn't seem to understand what I was getting at. She just cocked her head and left the lab, confused. After a bit of focus and some trial and error, I finally finished my new "treatment." It was already getting dark outside.

Black Potion: Aromatic. Bitter smelling. Tasty hot or cold.

That's coffee, all right.

I didn't see anything wrong with there being different potion flavors, just like there were different perfume scents. In the kitchen, I heated the black potion and poured some in a mug; its steam rose to my nostrils. As someone who adored coffee, that alone was scrumptious.

If anybody stumbled across me right now, they'd probably complain about the

coffee smell or ask why I'm drinking this. I glanced around to ensure I was alone before sipping the hot, black, aromatic potion. It flowed past my lips into my mouth, its scent traveling out my nose.

"Now, this...this hits the spot."

It had the perfect level of bitterness. I'd adjusted the mixture's ingredients to produce a slightly sour flavor too, which made for a refreshing aftertaste. The only unfortunate thing was that I used kelembia nuts as the black potion's primary ingredient. Those were hard to come by, so I couldn't mass-produce the stuff.

"It's been a long time since I had a good cup of joe." I took another sip and let out a long, satisfied sigh.

"See? He's lost it! Look at his face," Vivi whispered. She and Mina were spying on me in the kitchen.

"That Mr. Reiji..." Mina murmured. "Did he create something addictive?"

They think I made some narcotic and got myself high. To be fair, people did say that coffee could be addictive if you drank too much. However, there was no caffeine in this black potion. I decided to have the girls try it. I beckoned them, but the pair fled quietly.

"Master! Tasty done?!"

Here we go. My main target. I showed Noela the mug. "Yup! This is it."

"This?" Noela peered doubtfully into the hot black liquid and then looked up at me again. "Tasty...?"

"Take a sip." *This'll prove whether Noela's truly grown up.*

"Uh-huh." Holding the mug in both hands, Noela sniffed the unfamiliar aroma rising up, tilting her head. She took a small sip.

"Arroo?!" Her fur stood straight up.

She's totally shocked! Just watching her put a smile on my face. That was the look of someone trying coffee for the first time. *I can see her response coming.*

"Bitter! Nasty! Not tasty!"

“So?” I asked. “How is it?”

Noela set the mug on the table gently. She first looked puzzled, then conflicted, then annoyed, before finally sharing her thoughts. “T-tasty.”

There’s no way she means that. It was clear as day that she was holding back. *Okay. So, she’s less a child and more a junior high school student who thinks coffee drinkers are cool. I remember feeling like that.*

“I call it a black potion,” I told her.

“Groo? Black potion?! Sounds dangerous! Cool!” The fact that Noela latched on to the product’s name backed up my “junior high school student” theory. “But...”

“But what?”

“N-nothing.”

She was probably about to say “But tastes bad.”

“I guess you understand the black potion’s appeal too, Noela.”

“Arroo! Same as Master! Get appeal!” Little Noela exclaimed, trying her best to avoid being treated like a child.

Elaine’s butler, Rayne, dropped in with his young mistress. “About the retail version of your fragrance cleanser, Sir Pharmacist...” he whispered.

“It’s done,” I replied quietly.

“My word!”

I sneakily slid a black potion bottle from under the counter.

“M-my word, indeed!” the butler repeated. “Don’t tell me...this is drinkable?”

“You got it, boss.”

The old man grabbed my hand with both of his. “I’m willing to pay you anything you ask!”

“That won’t be necessary. This is still a prototype. I’d love to hear your thoughts on its flavor when you finish it.”

“You’re truly a saint, Sir Pharmacist!”

Elaine, Noela, and Vivi (who was working) overheard Rayne and I chatting. They chimed in.

“What are you two talking about?” Elaine demanded.

“Sir Pharmacist’s new product. I imagine you may be a wee bit young to drink it, milady,” Rayne replied.

I nodded fiercely. “Too early for Vivi and Elaine.”

“Noela understand. Tasty,” Noela added immediately. “Elaine, Vivi no understand.” The werewolf girl giggled, clearly happy to get on her very own high horse.

Although she’s just pretending.

“When I told my master about your fragrance cleanser, he seemed quite interested,” Rayne informed me.

“Lord Valgas, right? Heh. I suppose I’ll make another bottle, then.”

“Thank you, Sir Pharmacist!”

“If Lord Valgas finds himself exhausted, tell him to drink some of this black potion when no one else is around,” I instructed. “I guarantee he’ll get hooked.”

“You’re quite the rascal.”

I lowered my voice even more, as if I were doing some kind of black market transaction. “I’m just talking to myself here, but...”

Rayne didn’t say anything.

“Kelembia nuts are one of the black potion’s main ingredients,” I continued. “If I had a kilogram of those, I’m sure I could bottle tons of potions.”

“A kilogram, you say...?” The butler immediately took a note. “I’ll make sure to get what you need.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

We exchanged manly smiles before Elaine butted in. “What’re you two talking about?! Tell me at once!”

“You’re not old enough.” That phrase was becoming something of a secret password.

Even on Earth, there were folks who drank coffee and liked its flavor and folks who didn’t. So, there was no guarantee that Lord Valgas would enjoy the stuff. However, that concern ended up being pointless. A while later, Lord Valgas himself visited the drugstore with his butler and a kilogram of kelembia nuts.

“You’re a madman, Sir Reiji!” he exclaimed. “Without your black potions, I can’t work anymore!”

“That sure didn’t take long.” I smirked and shook my head, exasperated, as I handed him the ten bottles I’d made.

Lord Valgas reappeared a few days later, informing me that he recommended the black potions to other aristocrats. Apparently, however, people had mixed opinions on the brew. *Of course they did.* Normally, things would’ve ended there, but nobles had to act like nobles.

“How could they not understand the black potion’s appeal?!” Lord Valgas and the other coffee-drinking nobles demanded, getting on their high horses. Consequently, the aristocrats who hadn’t enjoyed the new potion began pretending that they did.

“Appreciating your black potion’s flavor is a status symbol in and of itself,” Lord Valgas explained.

It must suck to be an aristocrat, keeping up appearances no matter what.

Chapter 9:

Li'l Porky

NOELA SNIFFED the “black potion”—aka coffee—Mina was pouring into a mug. By all appearances, this would be a nice morning coffee break.

However, Mina was still somewhat perplexed. “Is that black potion really any good, Noela?”

“T-tasty! Mina just not understand.” Noela shook her head with her best jaded expression, continuing to pretend that she actually enjoyed coffee.

Noela’s discovered the thrill of getting on a high horse, I mused. I was genuinely enjoying the mug of black potion Mina had poured me.

“I can certainly see that Mr. Reiji enjoys it. But...”

Mina glanced at Noela, who sipped the black potion and grimaced. It was entirely clear that she hated the drink. Cocking her head again, Mina headed back to the kitchen, and the sound of dishwashing filled the house.

Noela trotted over to me. “Master?”

“What’s up?”

“Tasty potion...bitter.”

She was finally telling the truth. “You don’t have to force yourself to drink it, you know.”

“Noela want to enjoy!”

There was no way a kid like Noela could appreciate the flavor of coffee as dark as the name “black potion” implied. “Hmm. How to make coffee tastier...?”

Even kids enjoyed coffee with some milk or sweetener. If we had sugar, that would’ve been great, but sugar was apparently fairly valuable in Kalta. I thought honey might work; Mina used it whenever she made sweets.

“Honey would affect the coffee’s natural flavor, though,” I murmured. That meant I had no choice but to make gum syrup. I turned to Noela. “All right, got

it! I'm going to create a new product that'll let you enjoy this stuff."

"That possible?"

I nodded. My medicine-making skill was great at extracting drinkable flavors.

"Groo!" Noela exclaimed happily, wagging her tail. "Noela help!"

"Thanks, pal."

"Garroooo!"

The two of us headed to the lab right away. I gave Noela a sheet of paper with the ingredients I needed scribbled on it. While she found those, I prepared my tools. Noela worked efficiently, obviously excited by the prospect of a tastier black potion. *If only she were this diligent when she works in the drugstore.*

I smirked, watching as Noela finished up. "Master! These! No mistakes."

Yup, she brought all the raw materials I'd requested. I extracted their sweetness, enriching the mixture repeatedly until I produced what I wanted.

Syrup: Sweet liquid extracted from honey and other ingredients.

I dipped my finger into the thick fluid and licked it. "Sweet."

"Noela too! Noela too!" I handed her the bottle. She took a lick of the syrup as well. "Garoo?!" Noela was so overjoyed, her eyes seemed to fill with sparkling stars. She just kept licking her finger. "New tasty, Master!"

I could tell what was on her mind. "Just to be clear, this syrup isn't for eating on its own."

"Groo?"

Noela and I headed back to the dining room, and I mixed some syrup into her black potion. "That should go down easier." *It'd be even better if we added milk, but not today.*

Noela took the mug from me, sniffing it. "Smell same."

"Yeah, that's normal." If it smelled different, that would've been a problem.

Noela seemed skeptical about whether the black potion would taste any better, but she sipped it nonetheless. “The trace of sweetness beneath the bitterness is totally unlike fruit or honey! It blends beautifully with the flavor, and...”

She’s speaking normally—and giving tasting notes?! Guess I’ll take a sip too. I brought the mug to my lips. “Mmm. Yeah, that’s what I expected.”

“Decent tasty!” Noela declared, back to her usual self.

Decent, huh? I supposed the fact that coffee was bitter meant it couldn’t entirely be to Noela’s taste.

“But maybe addictive,” she added.

I put the syrup bottle in the middle of the table. “Feel free to use as much as you want.”

Noela sipped the black potion, tilting her head and adding more syrup repeatedly. *Yup, she’s trying to completely erase what’s good about coffee.* I asked permission to try her brand-new concoction.

“Mmmgh...sweet!” The drink was so cloying, I thought my brain would melt. Nothing about it tasted like coffee—it was just sweet black syrup. *I’m not a rhinoceros beetle or some other desperate bug!*

“This tasty, Master.”

“To you, at least.” I preferred the black potion plain.

Noela sipped away with a satisfied expression. I wasn’t going to stop her; there was no accounting for taste. So I thought, at least.

As the days passed, we went through a suspicious amount of syrup. However much I made, the stuff just vanished.

“Hey, Mina, have you been using the syrup to make sweets?”

“No, I haven’t baked anything recently.”

“I figured.”

If Mina were making desserts, I would’ve eaten some of them by now. That meant the only suspect was our little fluffball. Frankly, I should’ve asked her

before Mina.

I headed to the drugstore, where Noela was working. “Hey, Noela, you’re using way too much syrup.”

“Grrrrroo?” Her voice was a little...deep. Her tail swung heavily instead of wagging with its usual speed. “Noela only use little, Master. Only little.”

It was hard to detect because I saw Noela every day...but when I scrutinized the werewolf girl, who was usually skinny, I could tell she’d gotten a bit round.

“Have you gained weight, Noela?”

“Noela can’t gain weight.”

“You’re getting plump.”

“No, no!” she argued in her deep, thick tone. She stuffed her hand into the bottle under her arm and then pulled it out, drizzling syrup into her mouth.

“I-I’ve seen this somewhere before!” I exclaimed. *She’s turning into that beloved, world-famous yellow bear!*

With each movement, Noela’s tummy jiggled. It was cute in its own way, but it wasn’t what was uniquely cute about Noela. *Honestly, everything about her right now is the opposite of Noela normally.*

“You’re not supposed to eat syrup on its own!”

“No take Noela’s tasty!”

“You’re chubby because you’re pigging out on this stuff.”

Noela shook her head. Her tail wagged more laboriously. “Noela no chubby. Still fine!”

“Oh, please!”

Just then, an elderly female customer greeted us. “Excuse me.”

“Ah, welcome!” Noela and I replied.

The old woman smiled warmly. “What an adorable little boar.”



“Gararrrooooo?!”

I smirked. “She called you a boar.”

“Noela no boar! Werewolf! *Wolf!*” Noela retorted, her tail thrashing. The force behind it was absurd; each wag seemed heavier than the last. Considering how light and fast her tail used to be, it was shocking.

“Is that so? Oh ho ho! Dear me. I’m sorry,” the old woman apologized.

I snickered, and Noela shot me a glare. “Garroo...!”

“Don’t look at me like that, porky.”

“Groo? ‘Porky’?”

“Pork’s a kind of boar meat.”

“No eat Noela!” I hadn’t said I was going to, but Noela shoved me forcefully nonetheless.

Mina was listening to our back-and-forth. She popped into the drugstore after the old woman left. “My, oh, my. My heart goes out to you, Noela! You’re all round now.”

Oof.

“After all the times you boasted that you couldn’t gain weight!” Mina continued. “For instance, when I was struggling with my own weight problems! Well, at any rate, we’ll rely on you as our counter *boar* from now on.”

Mina’s revenge began in earnest. *Man, talk about a grudge.*

After Mina laid into her, Noela was literally trembling. “No drink Master’s tasty anymore!”

Getting called a boar by a random customer really must’ve messed her up. And then Mina poured salt on the wound.

Noela wound up sticking to her declaration. She no longer drank syrup on its own; she even stopped drinking black potions. Since she managed to hold back, she slimmed down quickly.

“Arrrooooo!”

Her tail wagged quickly and lightly once again.

Chapter 10:

The Water God's Orb

WHILE STAYING OVERNIGHT not long ago, Vivi noticed the water crystal Stanley had given us.

"Hey, Reiji, what's with that thing in the living room?"

"Oh, that? It's from the deepest chamber in a dungeon. An adventurer we accompanied there gave it to us." The Water God's Orb now served as a decoration, although it was apparently incredibly rare.

"Hunh."

"Might you have an idea as to that orb's purpose, Miss Water Spirit?" I asked with a little dramatic flair.

"Hmm...no clue." Vivi paused. "Actually..."

Huh? Seems like Vivi might know something.

I brought the crystal from the living room to the drugstore counter. "This is it."

"Yeah. Um..." Vivi gently touched the orb. It glowed fiercely.

"Yikes! Now, that's bright!" Closing my eyes didn't stop the light from piercing my eyelids. "What'd you do, Vivi?"

"N-nothing!"

After a while, the gleaming orb finally settled down. All it did was shine; nothing around Vivi and I actually changed. *Thank goodness. I was worried it might return me to Earth or something.* Noela and Mina stopped in to ask about the light, but they left after I explained.

"Did the orb respond because you're a water spirit?" I touched the crystal; nothing happened.

"Are you all right?" Vivi asked anxiously.

"I'm totally fine." Vivi stared at her outstretched fingertips, and I tilted my head curiously. *So, what the heck was that glow?* "Have you figured out

anything about the orb, Vivi?”

Just then, a single villager—an old man with a hoe slung over his shoulder—entered the drugstore. “Where’d that light come from?”

“This thing right here.” I pointed at the orb.

The old man’s eyes widened. “Th-th-this is the Water God’s Crystal!”

Well, my skill identified it as the Water God’s Orb, but...

“Wha...?!” Like the old man, Vivi seemed shocked. “Then it’s actually the real deal?!”

“‘The real deal’? What’s that mean?” I asked.

“Um...a really long time ago, people used this crystal in rain ceremonies. It was treated as a relic of the water god.”

The old man nodded. “You’re knowledgeable, young lady. A water priestess definitely caused that glow earlier!”

Vivi had a stiff smile on her face. “Um, Mister, I think you’re mistaken.”

“Who made this crystal shine?” The old man glanced at Vivi; she looked away quietly.

I pointed straight at the lake spirit. “Her, Mister.”

The old man gasped, looking Vivi up and down. “‘Twas you, young lady...?”

“Reiji! Stop trying to send me packing!” Vivi punched me lightly. *Thump! Thump!*

“Don’t word it like that! You make me sound terrible,” I complained. “Exactly what is a water priestess?”

“Naturally, she relays humans’ hopes and dreams to the water god,” the old man replied. “The priestess must also relay the water god’s words back to our village. It’s a terribly important role.”

She’s basically a translator, so to speak? Wait...there’s a legit water god?

“We’ve got no time to waste!” The old man rushed out of the drugstore gleefully.

“Isn’t this great?” I asked Vivi. “If you’re a priestess, people might bring you offerings again.”

“It’s just...” Vivi’s expression was, well, complicated.

“What *is* the water god?” I asked. For someone lacking specific religious beliefs, like me, the concept was hard to wrap your head around.

“What the name implies. But unlike spirits and fairies—who have physical bodies—you can’t see the water god with the naked eye. When humans do bad things, the water god makes rain pour and rivers flood—or even does the opposite and causes drought. That’s how they punish humanity.”

“Hmm. Punish, huh?” Floods and rainstorms could cause frightening damage. It didn’t surprise me that stuff like that led people to believe in acts of god. “And if a priestess touches the Water God’s Orb, it shines?”

“Pretty much.” Vivi hesitated. “I guess it’s more accurate to say someone with the potential to *become* a priestess.”

For a moment, I wondered why Vivi seemed to know so much about the water god. Then I remembered that she was actually a lake spirit. She’d been in this world much longer than me, and she’d seen a heck of a lot more too.

“Back in the day, priestesses performed rituals for the water god. But priestesshood’s tough work,” Vivi continued. “Priestesses aren’t salaried, they deal with restrictions forever, they pay for transportation themselves—and even though they pray nonstop, there’s no such thing as overtime.”

“You make the job sound awfully exploitative.” *I wonder if there’s a uniform.*

“Let me go home early, Reiji,” Vivi pleaded. “That old guy’s going to drop by again.”

“You seriously don’t want to become a priestess, do you?”

“Of course not! It’d be a pain!”

Talk about a paper-thin excuse. We had a life stone at the drugstore, so we never struggled for water, but I had a hunch that local farmers ran low. Long stretches of harsh sunlight—or torrential downpours—could damage their crops.

“Still,” I mumbled, “I probably couldn’t make anything that’d affect the weather.”

My medicine-making skill ran a list of ingredients past me. *I could?! But...if I actually created this product, I’d really be playing God. So I shouldn’t.* The ingredients were all super rare anyhow.

Vivi got her stuff in order and left quickly. “See you!”

“What a little punk.” I shook my head. “I never told her she could leave early.”

Soon, I heard shouting outside.

“Eeeeeek! I-I’m not a priestess! I’m a spirit!”

I’ve got a bad feeling about this. I glanced outside the drugstore, only to see a bunch of villagers carrying Vivi away against her will. “Uh-oh.”

I was starting to feel guilty for telling the old man that the orb had reacted to Vivi. Still, if I hadn’t said anything, he probably would’ve searched our whole house. *Crap. What’s my plan here?*

“What happen to Vivi, Master?” Noela inquired.

“She’s heading off to become the water god’s intern.” I imagined her fighting for her life at what we’d call a “black company,” an employee’s worst nightmare.

“Arroo?” With a tilt of her head, Noela showed that she had no idea what I meant.

Just then, the old man returned. “Mr. Pharmacist, I’d like you to let me hold on to the Water God’s Crystal.”

According to Vivi, the crystal was necessary for rain rituals or something, so it was better off with the old man. Here, it was only a decoration; besides, it’d be a shame if I unintentionally sold it to some evildoer. “Sure.”

“Ah, thank you so very much!” He grabbed my hand in both of his and shook it. “We must ensure the water god hears our requests.”

“Hope it rains,” I replied.

“Where living room crystal?” Noela asked, entering the drugstore. Seeing the

orb, she touched it, and it began to shine. “Arroo?!”

“Seriously?” I sighed. *Guess I have a request for the water god—I’d definitely rather these folks let Vivi handle priestesshood and leave my little fluffball alone.*

Meanwhile, the old man stared at the crystal uncertainly. “Wh-why...?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Well, when a water priestess is chosen, no other priestess can be selected till the current one passes away.”

“But, uh, the orb just glowed,” I pointed out.

“Groo! Shiny shine!” Noela poked the crystal.

Flash!

“Shine again!”

“Stop playing around. That’s too bright.” I pulled her away and turned to the old man. “Are you sure you aren’t mistaken about the crystal? Its official name is the Water God’s *Orb*.” My identification skill had described it as a “sacred treasure” or something.

The old man fell to his knees. “This isn’t the Water God’s Crystal!”

“Garroo?!” Noela clearly had no idea what was going on. She stared at the old man and me.

“I-I already told the villagers that it is!” the old man cried. “I said it’d rain once we performed the ceremony!”

Oh. Does that mean Vivi’s off the hook?

“Wh-what’s done is done.” He looked away awkwardly. “All I can do is have the villagers pray till it rains.”

He’s going to try to fudge it?!

“Is there any way you could make something to get me out of this predicament, Mr. Pharmacist...?”

“Impossible.” I shut him down as quickly as I could.

Still, the villagers *were* going to hold my poor employee captive until it rained. It was as if Vivi joined some culty operation and was trapped in their live-in dorms.

“Looks like I’ve got no choice.” I scratched my head. “I guess I’ll figure something out.”

The old man gazed at me respectfully. “Mr. Pharmacist...”

“I’ll do my best to fix this mess, so I need you to keep an eye on my girl,” I warned him. “Make sure Vivi’s treated well. At least three meals a day and seven hours of sleep. Got it?”

“O-of course! I’ll do everything in my power.”

The old man left, and I give Noela her instructions. “I need you to check on Vivi.”

“Uh-huh!” Noela dashed away from the drugstore, rapidly transforming into a wolf.

“How am I going to get us out of this?” I muttered.

The villagers would free Vivi as soon as it rained, but when it stopped, they’d just kidnap her again. I had to prove that they didn’t need a water priestess to make it rain.

I wound up spending the rest of the day working on my new concoction—a product that caused rainfall. Based on the ingredients I needed, it wasn’t something I’d finish anytime soon.

There *was* something I could make more quickly that’d free Vivi. Still, it ended up taking three full days to finish. If Ejil hadn’t helped me gather ingredients, it would’ve been even tougher.

“Once we’ve freed Vivi, please don’t forget the role I played, Doctor,” Ejil said.

“I know, I know. I just need to sing your praises to Vivi, right?”

“I knew you’d understand.” Ejil had it all planned out. Vivi was Noela’s friend, so if he got better acquainted with the lake spirit, it’d have a trickle-down effect

on his relationship with Noela.

I put my new product in a bag. “I was only able to make one, but eh, I don’t plan to sell this anyway.” I called Noela over. “Hey! Fluff master! We’re going to find Vivi.”

“Groo!” Noela practically snorted, impatient to go.

Mina and Ejil saw us off as we left the drugstore behind.

“Be careful, Mr. Reiji!”

“Doctor, Noela, take care!”

Once Noela turned into a wolf, I rode on her back, holding on to her backpack. We were heading to a town some distance from ours. That old man was coincidentally in Kalta for business when he encountered Vivi and the orb.

Noela dashed through the field. “Groo! Garroooo!”

Sounds like she’s in high spirits. She was almost acting like a dog that’d been taken for a jog. I bet she gets the urge to go for a brisk run now and then.

Speaking of running, Noela was moving at least as quickly as a scooter. If we got into an accident, I’d probably die. “It must feel great to sprint this fast, huh?”

“Arroo!” Noela agreed.

I wonder what she packed. I glanced inside Noela’s backpack only to find two potions and two rice ball lunches. I had a hunch, since I could hear the bottles clacking together. “What is this, a picnic?”

“Garoo?”

I guess one of these lunch boxes is mine. “Let’s set things straight real quick.”

“Groo!” Noela kept making a beeline for the village.

The village was at the foot of a mountain, with a river and field beside it. It was an awesome location, frankly. I had Noela turn back to her usual form, and we decided to look around town.

Even with a potion break for Noela, it only took us about two hours to arrive. It would've taken at least half a day by horse and carriage. Her speed and stamina were incredible. "That's my little werewolf."

"Noela fast!" Noela puffed out her chest happily.

Near the village entrance, we spotted the old man from before. Passersby greeted him; based on the conversations I overheard, I assumed he was the village elder.

"Ah, Mr. Pharmacist!" he exclaimed. "I've been waiting for you."

"Howdy."

The old man looked around and lowered his voice. "So, did you create something to solve our little 'village elder got carried away' dilemma?"

"It won't fix the problem outright, but it might straighten it out indirectly."

"Ah! I should've expected no less from the most famous alchemist in all the land!"

"I'm not an alchemist. I'm a pharmacist," I interjected as usual. *Where the heck did he hear that?*

"I'll need you to solve this on the sly, if you know what I mean," the elder warned. "I've got to save face."

"No problem." As for why I was acting so cooperative—well, I was the one who'd started all this by ratting Vivi out, not thinking it'd be a big deal. "How's Vivi doing? It's been a few days."

"We're treating the priestess well. This way!"

As the elder guided us, I asked something I'd been mulling over for a bit. "What did your village do about rain up until now? It doesn't look like you're having drought issues. Does the river flood a lot or something?"

"Not at all. The lord of this region has done lots of construction work that's cut down on flooding. As for droughts, we get about as many as the villages nearby, so it's not like we're the only ones dealing with them. Frequent sun isn't such a problem either, since there's a river here."

“Er...what’s the point of a water priestess, then?”

“Hrm.” The elder thought to himself and then giggled like a little girl. “Tee hee! I figured it’d be better to have one than not.”

What a dumb reason. Vivi, you sure have awful luck.

“But, you know, lots of folks around here think the water god helps keep the village happy,” he continued. “People still believe in the old ways. So, having a local priestess—a girl supposedly capable of communicating the water god’s will—soothes the townsfolk.”

I suppose I get where he’s coming from. And Vivi was a lake spirit, not an ordinary girl, so she wasn’t *completely* unlike a priestess.

The village elder eventually led Noela and I to a building the town used for gatherings. It was something like a community center. According to the elder, when the townsfolk had a problem, they met here to talk it over.

“This here’s the place,” he said.

When we entered, I spotted the orb resting on a luxurious pillow atop an altar. It was apparently the water priestess’s duty to pray before the altar three times per day.

“Priestess?” the elder called.

I heard a voice from behind the altar. “Water doesn’t really go with potato chips, Mr. Elder! I need juice, you know? It’s all about flavor compatibility!”

Crunch. Gulp.

“I’ll have someone get you grape juice right away.”

“Much obliged!”

I hesitated.

“Oh—and I want meat for lunch!”

“Understood.”

Crunch. Crunch. Gulp. Burp.

I peeked behind the altar. Vivi lay across a pillow, dressed as a priestess. She

was munching potato chips, ignoring the crumbs on the pillow and wiping her dirty fingers on her clothes.



“Aah,” Vivi sighed. “Being a priestess is pretty boring, but as long as I pray or whatever a few times a day, I get to lie around. Plus, priestesses get all-you-can-eat meals and snacks! This is the life.”

She’s totally this slobby at home, isn’t she? I felt like an idiot for worrying.
“Hey, punk!”

“Gah!”

“Enjoying your lazy new lifestyle?”

“R-Reiji?!” Vivi sat up straight immediately. “Wh-what’re you doing here?”

“I felt bad for letting the cat out of the bag, so I came to save you,” I replied.
“Looks like that isn’t necessary.”

“Do...do you want some chips?”

“No, I don’t. If you’re happy here, Noela and I will just be on our way. But if you want to come home with us, I’ll set things straight. What’s your answer, lazy lake fairy?”

“I’m a lake *spirit*.”

Even Noela—who was the most fired up about rescuing Vivi—let out an exasperated sigh. “Vivi having fun, Master.”

“She sure is. Let’s head home.”

“H-hey, wait! I’m really bored! Pigging out and napping is all well and good, but...”

“I must also ask you to reconsider leaving, Mr. Pharmacist,” the elder interjected.

“If a certain elder just admitted to his villagers that he made a mistake, this’d all be fixed.”

The village elder’s expression suddenly changed, evoking some hardboiled film noir. “Everyone...makes mistakes.”

Don’t try to make that sound like some famous quote. “Jeez.” I sighed. Pulling a bottle from my bag, I passed it to Vivi. “Drink this.”

“What is it?”

“I’ll explain later. I can take our orb back, right, Mr. Elder?”

“Of course.”

Earlier, I had Noela make a counterfeit crystal. I got it out of my bag.

“N-Noela’s! Noela make that!” the werewolf girl exclaimed.

Yikes...it’s just a cracked rock with paint on it. Well, whatever.

Vivi could just have taken some super invisiblize, but then the villagers would think she randomly vanished. That’d freak them out, since they were deeply religious.

“Mr. Elder, all you need to do is...” I explained the treatment’s effects to him and Vivi.

“Mm-hmm. I see. At that point, everyone should be satisfied.”

“That should be okay,” agreed the lake spirit.

“Thanks, Mr. Pharmacist.”

“No big deal. People like us have got to watch each other’s backs, after all.” I smirked.

Finished with the explanations, Noela and I left the community center and waited at the elder’s house.

“What new treatment do, Master?”

“It basically lets Vivi molt.”

“What ‘molt’ mean?”

Yep, molting was Vivi’s way out of this. But I didn’t know exactly how in-depth this “molting” would be, since my medicine-making skill described the treatment like a magazine ad would’ve.

Mr. Peel: Enables user to forget past and become better by reinventing themselves!

Noela and I spent an hour eating lunch and relaxing at the elder's house before we heard Vivi scream from the community center. "Aaaaaaugh!"

"Hey, Noela! Time to go."

Noela nodded, and we made our way toward the community center. After Vivi's awful screech, people started gathering nearby, which made it difficult to use the building's front entrance. I'd guessed that would happen, so I'd told Vivi to exit using the back door.

I spotted the village elder in the crowd of onlookers. "We're counting on you, sir."

"I understand. I'm so sorry I can't offer you anything in return for this."

"That's fine."

The three of us moved away from the front door. "My people, quiet yourselves!" the elder shouted to the crowd.

Noela squeezed my hand. "What happen, Master?"

"Let's just say the skin Vivi shed is still inside."

"Huh?"

Specifically, it was behind the altar. When Noela, the elder, and I entered the community center, several people were frozen in shock near the pillow where Vivi had been resting. Noela and I could've left and met up with Vivi now, but personally, I was curious about how things would play out.

"I'm a pharmacist! Make way, please!" I requested. The crowd parted for us.

"Ah, a traveling pharmacist!" the elder said. "Traveling pharmacist" was the explanation we decided on for my presence, so he was doing his job.

That should make things easy. "What happened here?"

"T-take a look!" Someone pointed a finger toward Vivi's...shell.

"She's dead?!" I pretended not to know what was going on. When I poked Vivi's "shell," it was immediately clear that it was empty; it had a weird texture too.

Whoa...that really is a shell. Vivi even molted her priestess outfit and the

potato chips she was eating. She had two in her mouth... She kind of looks like a duck. What awful timing, I reflected. But, wow, this terrible scene really is convincing.

Noela began to panic, eyes rolling back in her head. "Master! Bad! Real bad!"

"Don't worry, fluffball."

"Mr. Pharmacist, is the water priestess...?"

I put on my most serious face and nodded. "It's a shame."

"Master! Vivi—"

I clamped a hand over Noela's mouth. "Noela, I just need you to chill out for a second, okay?" *I really should've explained things to her properly.*

The elder walked toward Vivi's deathbed. "How could this have happened? The priestess, she's... And the Water God's Crystal is...!"

Not a bad performance at all, old man.

"You're right!" I said. "The crystal's transformed into...into something a child might make as a practical joke!" Actually, it'd taken Noela about half an hour to complete.

Noela pushed my hand away, unable to bear me badmouthing her prized artwork. "Noela's crystal! Good work! No practical joke!"

"Shut up, please." I covered her mouth again.

"Mmph! Mmph!" She thrashed a bit, so I held her tightly.

"What happened here, Elder?" someone asked.

"The priestess personally bore the brunt of the water god's rage."

"Unbelievable."

A wave of concern washed over the villagers. "Why was the water god so furious?" one asked.

The poor village elder looked a bit lost at the unexpected question. "W-well, you see..."

You aren't very good at improv, are you?

“Hey, what’s going on?” Vivi poked her head in the back door.

What’re you doing here?! I immediately hurled Noela at Vivi. “Go, Noela!”

The pair squealed as they collapsed on top of each other.

Perfect. I’m...I’m pretty sure nobody heard her.

“I don’t know why the water god was enraged,” the elder declared.

“However, I know the priestess sacrificed herself to protect us!”

All that hemming and hawing just to repeat the same answer. The elder’s reply actually made sense, though, since the priestess was the only one who could communicate with the water god.

I glanced at the village elder, and he nodded twice. Careful not to be noticed, I left the crowd behind the altar and tiptoed to the back entrance.

“That was so mean, Reiji!” Vivi pouted. “How could you throw Noela at me like that?”

“Sorry. I couldn’t help it.”

“Master!” Noela was irate. “Crystal hard work! Not practical joke!”

That’s what she’s angry about? That phrase really must’ve damaged her artistic pride. “Look, let’s go home. I’ll hear you out later.”

I had Noela turn into a wolf, and she carried Vivi and I out of the village without anyone spotting us.

Mina saw us and came out to greet us. “Welcome home, everyone!”

Noela turned back into a human. The rest of us let out exasperated sighs.

“I’ll go pour you all some tea,” Mina said, heading for the kitchen.

“What exactly was that treatment, Reiji?” Vivi asked. “I started feeling all slow and weird just after I drank it.”

“It makes you molt.”

“But I didn’t shed my skin or anything.”

“Wait...really?”

Vivi nodded.

“But that shell was basically just you,” I muttered. “With an amazing facial expression to boot.”

Could the Mr. Peel treatment have been strong enough to create a dummy of Vivi instead of helping her molt?

“It’s not my fault if the treatment didn’t work!” Vivi cried. “I wasn’t ready, and it just happened out of nowhere! So...um...will that village be all right?”

“Erm, about that...” I leveled with Vivi. “Basically, they didn’t *need* a priestess. They just thought it’d be best to have one.”

“What the heck?! What was the point of all my suffering, then?!”

“Right? I felt like an idiot for worrying and going to rescue you too.” I hadn’t known Vivi would enjoy her new life as a freeloader so much.

“At the end of the day, though, wasn’t this *your* fault, since you told the elder I was a priestess?”

I rapidly changed the subject. “Vivi, is there anything you’d like?”

“Wha...? Absolutely! What’s going on? How come you’re being so nice?!”

Ha. Still a child.

“According to the good doctor, the fault also lies with the village elder,” Ejil interjected. “After realizing he misconstrued the situation, he didn’t try to resolve it.”

Nice backup, Ejil!

“Good point,” Vivi said.

The Demon King glanced at me.

I know. I remember. “By the way,” I told her, “There’s no way I could’ve made that molting treatment without Ejil’s help.”

“Hunh.”

Doesn’t sound like you’ve made any headway with Vivi, buddy. Her nonchalance was crystal clear, but Ejil looked pleased nonetheless.

A few days later, the village elder dropped by the drugstore. He wanted to thank us and apologize for everything that happened, so he brought a bag of potato chips as a gift. We enjoyed the crunchy snack while drinking tea Mina had brewed us.

All I could think was that Vivi was right. Potato chips went better with juice.

Afterward, I had the village elder tell me what happened once Vivi, Noela, and I fled the scene.

“The villagers decided to enshrine the priestess’s remains,” he revealed.

“Hunh. Didn’t see that coming.”

So, they took her embarrassing shell—er, dummy—and now they’re displaying it? Who am I to judge? Still, it was too bad the dummy had those two potato chips in its mouth, making it look like a duck.

After the elder headed home, I told Vivi what he’d said.

“Huh?! The villagers are *worshipping* me?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.” It was more like they revered the priestess who protected the village.

“I see!” Vivi looked delighted. “Since I’m a lake spirit, humans worshipping me makes total sense—even though you constantly mess with me.”

“Vivi, I hate to break it to you, but they’re ‘worshipping’ you as a water priestess, not a lake spirit.”

“Ah...you’re right.” Her shoulders slumped.

After visiting the village, Noela had a creative phase. I taught her to make mud balls, since they were orb-shaped. She got really into the process.

“Master! Noela’s masterpiece!” She proudly thrust a mud ball into my face as I watched the store.

“Nice work, pal.”

“Garroo!”

It ended up being yet another peaceful day here at Kirio Drugs.

Chapter 11:

How to Raise a Griffin

“**M**ASTER, FELL,” Noela said from behind me on the way back from our herb meadow.

“What fell?” I turned around.

In her arms was an egg. What kind? It beat me. I used my identification skill.

Griffin Egg: Fertilized egg of a griffin.

“J-just put that back where you found it, all right?!”

“Noela decide, Master!”

“Please don’t say what I think you’re going to say.” I gulped. I had a sinking feeling.

“Noela raise!”

“Nothing good’s going to come of that. Quit while you’re ahead.”

“Noela feed. Walk.”

“You know for a fact Mina will end up having to care for it.”

Noela shook her head. “Not Mina! Noela responsible. For sure.”

“Really?”

A werewolf who wants to raise a griffin. Hunh. Would that be okay? Am I sure she won’t decide it looks tasty and eat it instead?

“It’s all well and good to announce that you’re raising the thing, but looking after a living creature isn’t easy,” I protested. “We don’t even know what griffins eat.”

Noela pouted as I criticized her plan. This wasn’t the first time she’d gone on

about wanting a pet; she'd said that countless times about cats and dogs. However, a griffin was definitely one step too far. If it matured and went feral on us, the Red Cat Brigade would probably need to step in and kill it. *Noela and her griffin versus peacekeeping mercenaries... I really don't want to see that showdown.*

"Monsters are dangerous, Noela," I added. "I mean, sure—if everyone were as strong and fast as you, we wouldn't need to be scared. But..."

"Arroo!" Noela frowned, turning her face away.

I've clearly upset her, but did I really have a choice?

"Won't be!" she insisted. "Noela raise so *not* dangerous!"

"Where's all this confidence of yours coming from?" I sighed heavily. *Jeez.*

We didn't even know whether the egg would hatch in the first place. *I guess a griffin that got used to humans might be tamable, though.* My knowledge of monsters was limited, which meant I should take this little argument to someone who understood more.

I returned to the drugstore with Noela, who held the egg carefully.

"Doctor! Noela! Welcome back!" Ejil greeted us right away. "Good work gathering herbs today!"

"Hi. Thanks for watching the store."

"No problem at all! It was easy as pie compared to destroying the world!"

I'd hope so. Talk about a ridiculous comparison.

Noela also acknowledged Ejil. "Noela home."

"Y-you're greeting me too?!"

Yeah, because I drilled into her that that's only proper. "Hey, Ejil, I've got a question for you."

"What is it, Doctor?"

"Is it possible to domesticate griffins?"

"Talk about a random question. Why do you ask?"

“Well...”

When I glanced at Noela, Ejil spotted the egg. “Ah, I get it.” He nodded several times. “Eggs are scrumptious!”

Noela’s eyebrows twitched strongly enough that I noticed.

“That’s not the point,” I replied. “I’m asking whether someone could raise a pet griffin.”

“They taste better when they’re younger. Very tender.”

Noela’s rage continued to build steadily. The only reason she hadn’t done anything to Ejil was that she held the egg. *Good work, egg.* Still, she cracked her tail against the floor like a whip.

“What about keeping a griffin as a familiar or something? As demon king, you’d know a lot about familiars, right?”

“Oh.” Ejil broke into laughter. “No, that definitely wouldn’t happen! Griffins never get attached to people.”

Seriously?

In a flash, all of Noela’s agitation and excitement vanished completely. *Whoosh.* I didn’t think she’d ever looked so anguished.

“Really, Ejil? I can totally picture demons using griffins as familiars. Riding on their backs and stuff.”

“We use small dragons called dracos for that. They can be a bit wild, but they’re usually loyal and obedient.”

According to Ejil, *raising* a griffin was fine and dandy. It was keeping a mature griffin that was difficult.

“Most griffins abandon their eggs. Individual griffins grow up alone, so they’re kind of automatically solitary... They don’t like people.”

“They basically see everyone around them as enemies, huh?”

“Exactly. Supposedly, griffins can fly and run on all fours so they can hunt food more easily.” Otherwise, they wouldn’t be able to survive on their own. “Young griffins mostly eat insects and the like. That said, they grow quickly. After about

two months, they're already as large as adult humans. They're also bright. That's another reason they're difficult to keep as familiars. Once they decide they're superior to their trainer, it's all over."

"You're a real monster specialist, Ejil."

"No, Doctor, I'm but a humble demon king."

I forgot who's supposed to be learning about griffins here, I realized, turning to Noela. "Did you hear that, Noela?"

"Groo..." She wore a sad expression.

I stroked her head gently. "Has your army ever hatched and raised a griffin, Ejil?"

"Well, first of all, griffin eggs aren't guaranteed to hatch. Even if they do, baby griffins are difficult to care for. So...no, actually." The monster expert was giving us nothing but reasons *not* to try raising a griffin.

Griffins, Ejil added, basically combined the strengths of tigers and eagles. Their powerful wings let their massive, horse-sized feline frames fly. Since griffins had eagle's faces, they also possessed broad, long-range vision.

"They sound tough."

"Yes, they are. They can't beat monsters that specialize solely in air or ground fighting, but they're good at detecting enemies, and their strength and mobility make them formidable all-rounders."

It frankly sounded like a griffin would be a super cool—and extremely useful—familiar. Plus, my Translator DX would let us talk with a griffin. That'd solve a lot of issues.

Well, I'd need to make some more Translator DX—I don't actually have any in stock. But that's irrelevant.

"How long until this egg hatches, do you think?" I asked Ejil. Noela looked up.

"I couldn't say. Sorry."

"Aren't you the monster professor?"

"How many times must I tell you, Doctor? I'm the *demon king*."

I left the drugstore to Ejil. Back in the lab, I sorted the herbs Noela and I had gathered.

“Master?”

“I know. Let’s see how Mina feels about the griffin egg, considering what Ejil told us.”

Noela’s eyes sparkled. “Noela take good care for sure, Master!”

“I know, I know. Let’s just hope your determination sways Mina.”

We wouldn’t be able to confine the griffin to the backyard. We certainly couldn’t keep it outside the drugstore either—to the average passerby, it’d look like a wild animal.

All right. We can cross that bridge after we get Mina’s permission and the griffin hatches. There were just so many cons to letting Noela keep the egg. If there was a single ray of hope, it was that none of us were sure if we could tame a griffin we raised from day one.

“Could you go get Mina?”

“Kay.” Holding the griffin egg carefully, Noela exited the lab. She soon brought Mina back with her.

“What is it, Mr. Reiji?” Mina asked.

I glanced at the large egg Noela held. “You probably already know what this is about.”

Mina forced a smile. “Um...I suppose so.”

“She really seems determined this time.”

Noela was kneeling, a stubborn but peaceful expression on her face. She honestly looked like the kind of dependable person you’d want as captain of your sports team.

I filled Mina in on everything Ejil said, adding that the griffin egg was, in fact, fertilized. “If we raise it, it’ll cause nothing but problems,” I concluded.

After thinking quietly for a bit, Mina spoke. “On the other hand, look at me. People normally run away from ghosts, but you let me stay here with you.”

It wasn't like Mina was some evil spirit. She was friendly, and we could communicate with her. Plus, she did chores. *Maybe raising a griffin is doable?*

"Mina agree?"

"I can at least tell that you're serious about this," Mina giggled, glancing at Team Captain Noela.

"Fine," I said. "Let's give this a shot."

"Isn't that great, Noela?"

The little fluffball nodded rapidly and handed Mina the egg. She trotted over and jumped on me. "Master!"

I gave her a big hug, enjoying her softness for a moment. "Let's do everything we can to raise this baby griffin right."

"Garrooooo!"

We started by keeping the softball-sized griffin egg warm. Noela watched it constantly.

I had close to zero experience caring for animals. If I were forced to pick something from the past that counted, then as an elementary schooler, I'd looked after the class pet—a green turtle—once a week. I never had a cat or dog at home, though.

"We *should* keep the egg warm, right?" I asked Mina.

She simply gave me a blank smile. "L-Let's just do our best."

"Fair enough. Have you ever had a pet?"

"I once told my parents I wanted a kitten, like Noela used to. But they never said yes."

I guess everyone's experienced that kind of disappointment.

Noela had an idea. She quickly spread a towel on the floor and then placed the egg on top, resting her warm tail over it like a blanket. "This warm, Master!"

"It sure is."

“When egg hatch?”

“Beats me. Hopefully soon.”

“Garroo!”

According to Ejil, griffins were solitary. *If griffin parents normally lay eggs and then abandon them, shouldn't this egg hatch just fine without us?*

Mina, Noela, and I had no idea what the right approach to hatching the griffin egg was. For days, we tried various strategies. We put the egg in sunlight during the day, and Noela wrapped her tail around it at night. Outside her work hours, she spent every waking moment with the egg.

“Master! Master!”

“Ugh...what’s up?”

Noela was in my bedroom, egg in hand, shaking me awake. “Sound inside!”

“Oh...awesome.”

“Hatch now!”

“It’s not going to hatch just because it’s making noise...I don’t think.”

It was still pitch-black outside. As I rubbed my eyes, I heard a noise from the egg.

“Garroo! Now, now, now! Master!”

“I-I heard it, I heard it. That sounded like something hitting the inside of the eggshell.”

“Yeah! Hatch!”

“I’m telling you, it probably won’t hatch yet.”

I tried to get back to sleep, but I kept hearing the egg. Whenever it made noise, Noela smacked and pulled at me, waking me up. The whole “sleep” thing wasn’t happening; each time Noela freaked out, it got harder to nod off.

“You’re on drugstore duty tomorrow morning, right, Noela?” I reminded her. “If you don’t get to sleep, you’ll be exhausted during your shift.”

“Fine! Sleepy no problem!”

“Well, it’s a problem for me.”

In the morning, Noela rocked unsteadily back and forth, exhausted. “Groo...”

Peck! Peck! PECK!

Those were definitely the loudest noises the egg had made so far. *Is...is it actually about to hatch?* I shook Noela. “Hey, Noela! Hey!”

The werewolf girl didn’t respond; she was fast asleep. “You’ve conked out *now*, of all times?!”

Peck! PECK!

The sounds continued, until...

CRACK!

A crack formed in the eggshell.

“For real?” I mumbled.

Then, a yellow beak popped through the crack. The eggshell fell away bit by bit as the creature within poked its face out. It had soft-looking gray down and round black eyes. “Caaaw...”

“It hatched?!”

“Kyu!” The baby griffin pecked away the rest of the shell, revealing its body. It was about the size of my palm, with small wings on its back. Its catlike feet had avian talons rather than hooves. The creature tried to stand on all four short legs but fell on its little butt.

“I-It’s adorable.”



“Kyu...”

You're not supposed to help baby birds with this kind of thing. I know the little thing needs to learn to stand on its own. But, dear God, do I want to give it a hand!

The baby griffin toppled over repeatedly. After about twenty minutes, though, it finally managed to stand proudly on all fours. It was doing its best, but its legs trembled.

“Back on Earth, I’d be recording every second of this on my phone,” I whispered.

I gathered that griffins learned to stand and move quickly—like herbivores—since they usually hatched alone. “Hey, Noela. Wake up.”

“Groo...?”

I gave her a hard shake, finally waking her. “Look! It hatched.”

“H-hatched? Hatched! Hatched...?!” She cocked her head, puzzling it out. “Master, when? When?!”

“Just a few seconds ago. I tried to wake you, but...”

Noela watched the creature on the bed carefully, almost like a cat stalking its prey. Eventually, the baby griffin started walking slowly, its legs still unsteady.

Pitter... Patter... Pitter... Thonk!

“Groo! Fell! Help up!”

I grabbed Noela as she rushed to help the small bird stand. “Hold your horses. It’s trying really hard to walk on its own.”

“What Griffy drink?”

“Griffy?” *Oh...that’s what she’s naming it.* “I have no clue what baby griffins drink. Maybe water?”

“Noela get water!”

“Calm down, fluffball.”

The baby griffin cawed as it walked around my bedroom, falling down over

and over. “It’s so cute,” I muttered. *I’m not sure I’ll ever get tired of watching this.*

“Groo... Cute.”

Noela slowly approached the baby griffin, wrapping her tail around it gently. It looked startled, but as it began to appreciate her cozy tail, its eyelids grew heavy. It blinked more and more slowly until it fell asleep.

“Dang. Your tail’s dangerous.”

“Food, Master.”

“Mina will probably make breakfast soon.”

“No! For Griffy!”

“Oh, right.”

I remembered Ejil telling me that baby griffins ate bugs. “Grasshoppers or locusts should do the trick. Can you get some, Noela?”

Noela stared at me with her best team-captain expression. *Whoa. She already looks like a pet owner.*

“Noela hate bugs.”

What the heck?! She only looks the part! “You just need to catch some with a net. No big deal.”

“Groo...” Noela was clearly uncomfortable with that idea.

“It’s for the baby griffin.”

“Noela watch Griffy. Master get bugs!”

Why, you...! “Have you never gone bug catching?”

“Noela no eat bugs.”

“That’s not really the point.” I personally thought bug catching was fun. Since Noela hated insects, though, I figured there was nothing fun about it from her perspective. *Too bad.* “All you need is the three sacred tools—a net, a cage, and a straw hat.”

“Groo! Griffy awake!”

“Are you even listening to me?!” *Whatever.*

I left the lab, heading to our small backyard. It was completely clear, thanks to the Weed Soul X we used the other day. “Which means...no bugs.”

After hunting ten whole minutes, I came up with zilch. This was going to be a problem. *I can't spend time out here every day bug catching.*

Noela trotted over.

“Are you going to help?” I asked.

“Mina angry.”

“How come?”

“Ask, ‘Noela pushing chores on Mr. Reiji already?’ Scary face.”

Yeah, Mina's expression must've been terrifying. “Want to catch bugs together, then?”

“Kay... Noela do best.”

Atta girl.

“We'll need a quicker way to do this,” I told Noela as we got to work. “We have to watch the drugstore and look after Griffy in our spare time. We can't afford to catch bugs out here all day.”

“What plan?”

“Well, we don't need to find insects here in the yard. If we attract them someplace nearby, that'll solve the problem.”

“Groo?”

It was the crack of dawn, but I was about to create a new product. *Oh well.* “I'm going to make a bug lure. I'm counting on your help, Noela.”

“L-Leave to me.”

She sure looks delighted...not.

I entered the lab. Noela came in a moment later, carrying Griffy in her hands. As we started working, we watched the tiny baby griffin, who still couldn't walk quite right.

I already had some lure in stock, but that stuff would cause a giant panic by attracting monsters and beasts. “I need something that specifically lures *bugs*,” I murmured.

I gazed at Griffy occasionally, but with Noela’s help, I managed to finish the prototype as the sun rose.

Bug Gel: All-in-one beetle/bug/insect lure.

Perfect. Now we can get Griffy some grub.

Noela was watching Griffy carefully when Mina came in, hearing our voices. “Good morning! Is this little Griffy?”

“Griffy hatch!” Noela showed Mina the small griffin on her palm.

“So, a griffin’s a four-legged bird?”

“According to Professor Monster, it’ll be an adult human’s size in about two months.”

“Goodness! That’s certainly fast.”

Yup. Sure is.

A baby griffin trotting around the house was fine and dandy. When Griffy got bigger, though, we wouldn’t be able to keep it inside, and certainly not in the backyard. Still, Mina and Noela were mesmerized by Griffy, which made me want to ensure that this worked out.

“There’s got to be something I can do,” I mumbled. *If Griffy will be an adult human’s size in two months, then in one month, it’ll probably be the size of a big dog.* “So, I’ve got to come up with a plan in a month.”

Mina left to make breakfast, and I dragged Noela outdoors to use the bug gel. Of course, Noela brought the cawing Griffy along. I doubted she planned ever to leave the little one alone.

I spread bug gel here and there. “Griffy’s food should come to us now.” I would return tonight or tomorrow morning.

“Master, Griffy hungry.”

“You can tell?”

“*Noela* hungry.”

“So, you’re saying you don’t actually know.”

We headed back into the lab, and I decided to give the “hungry” Griffy some water. I brought a water droplet on the end of an eyedropper to the baby griffin’s mouth. Griffy cocked its head and opened its tiny beak, revealing its short tongue. It licked the water droplet.

“It’s working!”

“Noela give too, Master!”

I showed her how to use the eyedropper to create a water droplet, and we switched places. She did as I instructed, managing to get Griffy to drink.

“Next! Next!” Noela squealed, excited.

She tried to give Griffy more water, but its thirst seemed quenched after the second droplet. It didn’t even look at the eyedropper anymore.

Noela was disappointed; her shoulders slumped. “Griffy hate Noela, Master.”

Whoa. Noela’s heartbroken—she’s on the verge of tears. “Nah. You just gave it too much water. Wait a while, and I’m sure Griffy will happily drink more.”

“Arroo... ’Kay.”

And so, Noela’s pet-raising struggles began.

While eating the breakfast Mina had prepared, she tried to feed Griffy some scrambled eggs. “Mina’s eggs. Tasty. Eat!”

Griffy turned away, uninterested.

“Looks like bugs really are the only option,” I observed.

“Griffy hate Noela, Master.”

“How many times have I told you? Baby griffins eat *bugs*.”

Mina watched, smiling.

Vivi dropped in later, since she had a shift today. “Morning!”

I couldn’t tell whether Noela heard Vivi arrive, but she scooped Griffy up in both hands and trotted into the drugstore. When she saw the lake spirit, she exclaimed, “Vivi, look!”

“Aaah!” Vivi shrieked. “It hatched!”

Noela had been holding on to the egg for days, so all the drugstore employees—and even the regular customers—were aware of the thing.

“Kyu! Kyu!” Griffy chirped.

“Li! Kyu,” Vivi whispered.

“No, Vivi. Griffy.”

“Huh? ‘Griffy’ is super dull. ‘Kyu’ is way cuter!”

“Vivi bad at naming.”

“Says you!”

You’re both bad at naming pets.

Mina listened from inside the house, a smile on her face. “Things are going to get lively around here.”

“I’ll have to talk to Professor Monster about what to do when Griffy gets bigger.”

“It’s such a shame,” Mina said. “Ejil can be quite helpful when he wants to. Yet...”

“I know. He’s pretty well informed.” Still, my overall impression of Ejil—that he was one pathetic demon king—hadn’t really changed since we met. *I guess I can depend on him to be consistent in that sense. Him and Vivi, actually.*

“If Ejil just toned down the things he says and does by, like, 50 percent, Noela might actually look his way,” I added.

“Well, I doubt Noela’s paying Ejil any thought now. She’s totally focused on Griffy.”

“Good point.”

After breakfast, drinking my morning mug of black potion, I heard Vivi and Noela talking in the drugstore. *I'm fine with a little chitchat, but you two are working, right?*

I peeked in. As I expected, the girls were arguing about Griffy.

"Hey!" I called. "What's with the racket? You better be done getting ready to open."

"Ah! Reiji! Noela's being a party pooper!"

"Here we go."

"No, Master! Vivi pooper!"

This must be how it feels to teach preschool. "Calm down. First off, are you done getting ready to open the—"

"Noela won't let me touch Kyuu!"

"Not Kyuu, Vivi! Griffy."

"How many times do I have to tell you that 'Griffy' isn't a cute n—"

"Who *cares*?!" I yelled.

The baby griffin trotted around the drugstore, looking at the products with fascination. *Cool as a cucumber.*

"You shouldn't touch Griffy too much in the first place," I added. "Leave it alone."

"How come?!" they both cried. Then the pair "realized" something. "Oh!"

"Master want Griffy for self!"

"You don't want me to touch Griffy because I'm not human!"

"You're both wrong! God, you two are such pains!"

"Noela care for Griffy!"

"Can't you let me pet it a *little*?"

"Master!"

"Reiji!"

They were clamoring all over again. They hadn't even restocked the shelves, and the store shutter was only halfway open.

Hearing the ruckus, Mina popped in. She smiled, but there was a chilling darkness to her expression. "Noela, looking after Griffy is all well and good, but don't you have other chores to deal with first?"

"Groo?!" Noela froze like a deer in headlights.

"And you, Vivi. Did you come to the drugstore to play around?"

"N-no. I'm...h-here to work." Like Noela, Vivi stiffened.

"Then let's get to work, shall we?"

"K-kay."

"R-right."

Noela and Vivi started doing their jobs. I apologized to Mina with my eyes. As the drugstore owner, I really should've been the one chastising the staff. Mina, however, simply smiled and headed back into the house.

The workday ended without trouble, and Vivi waited in the drugstore while Mina made dinner. *She must really want to see Griffy eat.*

After closing the store, I headed outside to see whether we attracted any bugs. "You have the equipment, Noela?"

"Yup!"

Noela carried the three sacred bug-catching tools—a straw hat, a net, and a cage. She was ready to rock and roll.

Doesn't she supposedly hate bugs? I guess people really do mature when they have a goal. I gazed at Noela, nodding in a fatherly way.

It only took a moment to figure out where we'd placed the gel earlier. There were tons of insects—bugs, beetles, everything imaginable.

Noela hesitated and then quietly pulled her straw hat over her eyes. "N-Noela...see nothing."

I didn't have an issue with creepy-crawlies, but even I could barely handle this many. At the end of the day, though, we had no choice. Griffy needed food.

"G-get the net ready, Noela." Like a surgeon working with a nurse, I had Noela hand me the bug net without even looking at her.

"Groo."

"Oof!" Focusing, I swung the net downward toward the bugs. Pulling the net toward me, I checked inside. "Hey, Noela! Check it out! It's a Hercules beetle!"

"Her cue leez?" She tipped her hat up to peek at the creature.

"You've never seen one?" I pulled the beetle out of the net and showed her.

"Groo?! It...cool!" Noela's eyes suddenly sparkled.

"Right?"

We wound up catching two Hercules beetles and three crickets to take back and feed Griffy.

After Noela and I got home, it was chow time. *Feeding Griffy by hand might help with the whole "taming" thing*, I thought. With that in mind, I put some crickets in my palm and presented them to Griffy.

The baby griffin inspected the crickets curiously before seemingly deciding that they were, in fact, food. It thrust its beak forward, pecking my hand a few times.

Thunk! Thunk! Thunk!

"Ow!"

Mina covered Noela's and Vivi's eyes. "Y-you mustn't look!"

"Can't see, Mina!"

"Seriously! What're you doing?!"

I understood; this might've been a little too shocking for the kids. As Griffy munched, a cricket leg momentarily poked out from its beak. Then the insect vanished into the baby griffin's gullet.

Noela and Vivi kept complaining loudly.

“Why cover eyes?!”

“Yeah! I wanted to see Griffy eat!”

Mina glanced at me. “Despite how cute it is, Griffy’s certainly a monster.”

“Yeah, totally.” The baby griffin showed those insects no mercy. *I should make sure the bugs are easier to eat next time and avoid this gory sight.*

Instead of feeding Griffy the beetles we caught raw, I added them to some dumplings. Mina came up with the idea. Frankly, it made me want to give her a Nobel Prize.

Noela set down a plate with two dumplings in front of Griffy. “Bug dumplings!”

I personally thought that sounded pretty gross, so I started calling them something else. “There you go, Griff. Today’s meatballs.”

The dough balls full of beetles *were* round and white, like moon-viewing dumplings. Still, if you put sauce on them and roasted them, they also looked like meatballs. That said, they were 70 percent bug meat inside. Not realizing that, Noela—hungry as always—tried to eat one; I stopped her immediately.

Griffy pecked at the meatballs. The baby griffin had hatched about a week ago. It was a tiny bit bigger, and we let it wander around outside the house under Noela’s supervision. Whenever someone passed by, Noela ranted about how wonderful Griffy was, so our regulars were already used to the little critter.

I was still keeping Griffy secret from Annabelle, though. There was a good chance she’d see the griffin as a threat to Kalta and chase it off.

I was chatting with Paula as usual when she demanded, “Is keeping a pet griffin doable, Rei Rei?”

“I can’t say for sure. I’m brainstorming ways to handle it, though.”

Mina forced a smile as she brought us tea.

“Noela was in charge of watching our little companion at first, but now we all take care of Griffy.”

"I can see why," Paula replied. "After all, it's sure cute."

"Right?" I agreed. "It can't fly yet, but sometimes it flaps its little wings."

"Aw! I want to see that."

"It's adorable," Mina said cheerfully.

"It'll be horse-sized eventually, right? That's kind of scary."

"Of course an adult griffin would look scary," I replied. "They have the same sharp eyes as birds of prey too."

"I wish Griffy could keep its big, round brown eyes," Mina said with a sigh.

However, Griffy grew even larger. It was about the size of a chicken now, so it was too big to call a baby. Still, it had soft, fluffy down, like when it hatched.

"If only Griffy would stay nice and tiny," Paula said.

"No, Paula!" Mina protested. "It's all about the big, round eyes!"

Stay nice and tiny... Big, round eyes... I hesitated.

"What's the matter, Mr. Reiji?"

"Er...nothing."

On Earth, lots of pets were crossbred to make them easier to look after. Toy poodles, for example, were far smaller than regular poodles. *What about a toy griffin?* I mused. *Problem is, Griffy already hatched.*

"I've been wondering about this for a while," I interjected. "Uh...is Griffy a girl?"

"I wonder!" Mina replied.

"Is that really important, Rei Rei? As long as Griffy's cute, what does it matter?"

"You're right, I guess. Cuteness is crucial."

"Kyu! Kyu!" Griffy cawed outside.

I heard wings flapping, along with Noela's voice. "Little more!"

Noela was cheering the tiny griffin on. According to Professor Monster, Griffy

would start flying about two months after it hatched.

“Hmm,” I murmured. *I mean, I could create a product to keep pets small and easy to look after. But would that really be right?* I’d ask how everyone else felt after I thought it over.

Yesterday, I’d taken some Translator DX and tried to talk to Griffy, but its cawing hadn’t sounded like anything but bird calls. In other words, Griffy wasn’t mature enough for thought transference.

“Professor Monster said griffins don’t like people...but Griffy’s definitely attached to us, right?” I asked Mina. Even if it wasn’t, the young griffin definitely wasn’t *afraid* of us.

“I’d say so,” she replied. “Maybe because we feed it?”

If you cared for a griffin, you could apparently keep it tame and docile, like a zoo animal. Still, our resident monster expert had said that hatching and procuring food alone gave baby griffins solitary personalities.

Griffy was a far cry from alone, though. Mina, Noela, and I—and, when we weren’t around, Vivi—fed the small griffin. *I’d say we’ve kept Griffy from growing up solitary.*

Paula rushed outside. “Let me join in! I want to play with Griffy too!” These days, visitors often watched Noela play with Griffy or even petted the little griffin themselves.

“Griffy’s flying practice!” Noela replied.

“That’s a thing?”

“Groo!”

“Griffy might be getting used to people,” I pointed out to Mina.

“Yes, that’s true.”

“I doubt it’d attack someone.” I’d be glad if our neighbors and Annabelle reached the same conclusion about Griffy. However, Mina tilted her head, unsure. “Looks like we’ll have to build Griffy a stable,” I added.

“Oh! Absolutely.”

I better schedule that with Gaston. "There's a lot we need to take care of."

"Mm-hmm."

"But you know what? Since Griffy hatched, things have gotten fun around here."

"Agreed," Mina giggled. I smiled in return.

I heard a carriage pull up in front of the drugstore. The door opened, and Elaine made her presence known. "I've arrived!"

Through the window, I watched her signature drill-like curls sway as she took her butler's hand, disembarking gracefully.

"Drills," Noela greeted her.

"Good day, Noela. Griffy's sure gotten big!" Elaine chattered with the two girls outside the house, eventually entering the drugstore. "Good day, Sir Reiji, Mina."

"G-good day." Mina returned Elaine's greeting awkwardly.

If saying "good day" is that embarrassing, she should just say "hello" the normal way.

"Hey," I called. "Did you see how big Griffy got?"

"I did! Griffy's truly growing like a weed!" Elaine strolled behind the counter to sit beside me. However, Mina quickly stepped between us.

"Wh-what is it, Mina?"

"I don't see any reason you need to sit next to Mr. Reiji."

Swish. Swish. Swish. The two girls began a strange strategy game, shuffling aggressively around each other.

What're they even doing?

"It'd be nice if Lord Valgas gave official permission for Griffy to live in Kalta," I suggested to Elaine. "I mean, pretty much everyone's helping to raise it at this point. We're all attached."

"I discussed Griffy with Father the first time I laid eyes on it, Sir Reiji," Elaine

replied.

“Wait—really? What’d he say?”

“Nothing much. All he really said was, ‘Sir Reiji sure gets into some strange hobbies. Ha ha ha!’”

“Is that so...?” Lord Valgas might react more strongly when he saw Griffy all grown up. *This would be so much easier if I were a beast tamer. I could teach Griffy tricks and stuff.*

“Wait!” I exclaimed. “Maybe I can?!” With the Translator DX, I might be able to show the townspeople that Griffy was a safe pet monster who listened to Noela and I, and that the young griffin’s flight and combat abilities would protect Kalta. “That might just work!”

“What’re you thinking, Sir Reiji?” Elaine looked over, gently pushing aside Mina, who was still jostling her defensively.

“I bet I’ve come up with a good—”

Noela rushed into the store. “Master! Bad news!”

“What’s up?!”

“Griffy not eat bug dumplings!”

“Meatballs, you mean. *Meatballs*. For real, though?”

“Super real. Biggest real.”

Ejil had said something about only young griffins eating bugs. I figured refusing the beetle meatballs more or less proved that Griffy was growing, which made me want to smile proudly. At the same time, if Griffy got as big as a horse, its food would wind up costing a ton.

“Ah!” I exclaimed. “If I combine two products—the irresistible tuna scent and the lure...” *Time is of the essence, and I’m not sure what Griffy wants to eat. So, I’ll just ensure it grows into a griffin that likes everything!*

“Evil face, Master.”

“Noela’s right, Sir Reiji. You have a villainous expression!”

“When did you fall from grace, Mr. Reiji?”

Without answering, I headed to the lab.

The aroma of the lure I made before attracted monsters using pheromones; it didn't whet their appetites. Meanwhile, the irresistible tuna scent was meant solely for cats. I fused the two products as best I could, creating something entirely new.

"Heh heh heh... Griffy won't snub this!"

Monster Seasoning: Irresistible to monsters. Monsters will devour any food seasoned with this product.

I sprinkled some of the prototype on the bug dumplings—aka meatballs—Noela said Griffy wouldn't eat.

When I brought the dish into the drugstore, the werewolf girl reacted first, cocking her head. *Sniff! Sniff!* She traced the new scent in the room.

"I combined our lure with the irresistible tuna scent," I explained to the girls. "That made a new product that gives off an aroma monsters lo—"

Leaping up, Noela tried to steal the meatballs.

"Whoa! Hey!" I twisted into a pretzel, avoiding her hands. "These aren't for you!"

Noela stared at the "meatballs" I held. "Smell good..."

I guess the lure works on Noela, like the repellent. "There're bugs in these."

"No way. Master never fool Noela."

I hadn't expected Noela of all people to act like this, considering how the bugs grossed her out before. These were the exact same "meatballs" Griffy ate, but she already totally forgot that.

"The nose works in mysterious ways," I muttered. *Heck, once I get a whiff of curry, I could eat a horse. This must be similar.*

As I paused, arriving at that explanation of sorts, Noela swiped the meatballs from me.

“Hey! Wait!”

She ignored me completely, bringing a meatball to her mouth. “Groo...?”

“I told you! There’re bugs in them.” I saw something red and brown poking out of the dough.

As Noela noticed the cricket leg, her fur stood on end. “Arroo! Master trick Noela?!”

“Uh-uh. Split it open.”

Noela carefully cracked the meatball in half. Of course, there were crickets inside. The werewolf girl froze, expressionless. “Tasty? Bug flavor? Tasty...bug?”

Realizing that the delicious-smelling meatball contained bugs, she began to panic. Mina and Paula stood off to the side, giggling.

“I’ll go give those to Griffy,” Mina volunteered. I handed her the plate, and she headed outside.

Noela was repeating the words “tasty bug” to herself, frozen in place.

“That’s right. Every yummy thing you’ve ever eaten was full of bugs,” Paula whispered to her.

I smacked the tool shop owner’s head. “Knock it off.”

Noela seemed to take Paula’s dumb lie seriously. She fell silent, unable to bear the shock.

Claiming she remembered something she had to do, Paula went home. “Later!”

Talk about irresponsible. I picked up the motionless werewolf girl and carried her to the living room sofa. “You’re just having a bad dream, Noela.”

At the same time, I heard Elaine’s and Mina’s excited voices outside.

“L-Look at it go!”

“It wouldn’t even *glance* at that food before!”

Huh? Sounds like that monster seasoning did the trick. I supposed that, if the seasoning had fooled even bug-hating Noela into stealing beetle meatballs, it

must be pretty effective.

I grabbed a potion bottle from the drugstore, opened it, and had Noela sniff it. “This is a tasty potion, Noela. Come back to us.”

She grabbed the bottle and chugged it. “Garroo,” she cooed happily, then fell asleep with a relieved expression. I placed a blanket over her and made my way outside. Then I heard the madness.

Thunk! Thunk! Crunch! Crunch!

Griffy was pecking the meatballs, devouring them with insane vigor.

“Griffy’s eating a whole lot, Mr. Reiji!”

“Phew. I’m glad the monster seasoning works so well.” If it only affected Noela, it would have been pointless.

“Sir Reiji, I had a stroke of genius while watching little Griffy,” Drills informed me.

“Do tell.”

“What if you made a product that did the *opposite* of the monster seasoning?”

“Hmm?”

“Well, those bug meatballs smell good to Griffy now, don’t they? What if you made a product to add to things Griffy *shouldn’t* eat? Some sort of unappealing scent? That way, you can teach Griffy what food’s all right and what isn’t.”

Since adult griffins were omnivores, Elaine was suggesting we use scents to teach Griffy what it couldn’t eat from a young age. “Heck of an idea, Drills.”

“Hooray! Sir Reiji praised me!” I patted Elaine’s head; she closed her eyes happily.

“Ahem! Mr. Reiji, don’t forget that I came up with the meatball system,” Mina interjected.

“Huh? Oh, right. Of course.”

“Wasn’t that a good idea?” She was smiling, but it was putting me under immense pressure.

“Of course...ma’am.” I can’t believe she got me to call her that.

Mina trotted over and tilted her golden hair toward me. *Oh, I get it.* I patted her head as I had Elaine’s a second ago. Mina fell completely silent, her happy face relaxing. *Glad I got the answer right.*

I had a feeling Elaine’s idea would be incredibly important when it came to coexisting with a griffin. If Griffy grew into a calm beast that listened to people—specifically, Noela and me—and didn’t eat livestock or humans, there’d be no need to make a treatment to stunt its growth. Whether training Griffy went well would depend entirely on us.

Griffy cooed and chirped adorably at Mina, who held the dish of meatballs. It looked like the tiny griffin wanted seconds.

“Here you are, little one,” said Mina.

As soon as she put the plate down, Griffy started eating ravenously. “Kyu! Kyuu...”

Jeez. Just watching the griffin munch happily made me feel warm and fuzzy inside.

The next day, Ejil had a shift at the drugstore.

“What kind of food should I not feed a griffin, Professor Monster?” I asked.

“‘Professor’? I’m the demon ki—eh, whatever. What do you mean?”

I explained that I wanted to teach Griffy what it should and shouldn’t eat so it wouldn’t misbehave.

“I see,” Ejil replied. “Not a bad idea at all. The question is whether limiting a griffin’s diet will allow it to grow properly.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “Darn... I guess there’re things even the good monster professor doesn’t know?”

I flashed Ejil a hopeful glance, and he lit up like his day in the sun had arrived at last. “Doctor, I’m the demon king! I make the impossible possible!”

Well, doesn’t he sound cool.

“My army’s draco tamer is familiar with raising monsters. I asked them some questions!”

He’s acting like an authority based on someone else’s advice? Ah, whatever. Any input helps.

“Omnivores can easily eat fish as well as meat, you know,” Ejil informed me. “That said, preparing fish for all of Griffy’s meals wouldn’t be easy. Kalta isn’t too close to a seaport.”

Exactly. We didn’t have the technology to freeze food; the fish sold in town was mostly dried. And since shipping from the seaport was expensive, fish sometimes ended up pricier than meat.

I nodded, and Ejil continued. “Also, it’s not quite accurate that young griffins *only* eat insects. Griffins are omnivores from birth. However, baby griffins need to eat bugs because they can’t fly or move quickly yet.”

“So, adult griffins could *still* eat bugs?”

“Correct. Griffins stop eating bugs when they mature because they can catch better food.” If a griffin could hunt while flying in the sky or running on land, there was no reason for it to eat insects.

We did have evidence that Griffy could still eat bugs, since it ate the beetle meatballs. According to Noela, Griffy was growing out of those, but it was probably annoyed that we were feeding it bugs even though it was getting older. Greediness, basically.

Still, I was betting that—for an adult griffin—the amount of food in the meatballs was nowhere near enough.

“You could just keep feeding Griffy bugs,” Ejil said, “but I doubt it’d get the nutrients it needs. It might end up weaker than wild griffins.”

“I want to avoid having to stunt its growth.”

“Which means meat.”

Meat that’s okay to eat? Like... “I guess we can try feeding it monster meat.”

If we did, we could probably put repellent on some beef, horse, pork, chicken, and lamb, to teach the little griffin what was okay to eat and what wasn’t.

I stared at Ejil.

“What is it, Doctor?”

“Your army has lots of monster meat, I bet.”

“Of course.”

I knew it. Ejil could procure monster meat, Mina could prepare Griffy’s food, Noela would be in charge of its exercise, and I’d manage everything overall. After talking it over, that was the plan we came up with.

We trained Griffy not to eat certain foods, and the griffin gradually grew up.

Ker-thunk. Ker-thunk.

“Kyu! Kyu!” Griffy cried, chasing Noela.

“Noela not lose to Griffy!”

When it looked as though Griffy was about to catch up, Noela concentrated and sped away, putting distance between them. The pair repeated that process over and over on the open plain near town.

Today was our day off, so Noela, Mina, Griffy, and I were picnicking. Mina and I sat on the sheet we laid out, watching Noela and Griffy play tag.

“Noela and Griffy look like they’re having a blast,” I said. “They’re like siblings.”

“Aren’t they?” agreed Mina, pouring us some tea.

Just two weeks ago, Griffy was the size of a chicken. Now it was about as big as a baby bear, or maybe bigger. It might even have been larger than Noela’s wolf form. The gray down the griffin was born with was changing to brown and white feathers.

“Kyu!”

Griffy flapped its wings as it ran, hovering briefly before landing and running again. It was getting close to proper flight.

“I wonder what kind of monster meat Ejil’s been bringing,” I said.

“According to him, it’s from familiars his army had no choice but to put down.”

“That’s a relief.” I wouldn’t have put it past Ejil to flat-out kill monsters if there wasn’t enough meat for Griffy—especially because Noela was so invested in the griffin. I doubted Ejil would consider the morality of his actions if it meant impressing her.

Noela hopped on Griffy’s back. “Faster! Higher!” she yelled, patting its neck.

Flap! Flap!

“Kyu! Kyu!”

Yeah, Griffy can hover a bit, but it can’t quite fly yet.

Still, Noela seemed overjoyed. She waved at me from afar. “Master! Flying now!”

“Not quite!” I shouted, waving back.

We still fed Griffy beetle meatballs, but ever since we started giving it monster meat, the griffin seemed to have grown much faster. Now, Griffy was probably about the age when it would’ve hunted and eaten weaker monsters in the wild.

“Do you think monster meat’s good for Griffy?” Mina asked.

“I wonder. Going by its size, I’d say so.” That might’ve been partly caused by a growth spurt, though.

“Kyu!” Griffy ran in the direction Noela pointed. Day by day, the griffin was getting smarter.

It might be about time to retry Translator DX, I thought. I sipped the translation treatment from the bottle I’d brought.

“Can I have some too, Mr. Reiji?”

“If you’re fine with drinking from the same bottle, sure.”

“N-no problem at all!”

Mina stared at the bottle I handed her. Glancing at me awkwardly, she took a small sip.

“Bam! Indirect kiss.”

“D-don’t say that!”

As I teased the now bright-red Mina, I heard voices.

“Now that way! Fast!” Noela squealed.

Griffy cawed, and—almost as though from a subchannel—I heard, “Instructor, I can’t run anymore! What’s over there?”

Noela patted Griffy’s side exuberantly. “There! There!”

“Griff wants to rest.”

“Groo? Slow down? No give up fly!”

“Griff isn’t giving up,” Griffy cooed sadly. “Griff just...”

“Griffy’s having a rough time,” said Mina.

“Yeah. In its position, I might’ve run away by now.”

“Kyuu! Kyuu!” Griffy cried loudly. “Please, no more! Master!”

It totally just looked toward us. Wait—is “Master” me?

“I guess Griffy sees you as its master,” observed Mina.

“Then Noela is its demonic drill sergeant.”

“I’m starting to pity Griffy.”

Yeah, me too. But why am I its master? After all, Mina fed Griffy lots, and Noela exercised it so often that it called her “instructor.” Guess I’ll just ask.

“Hey, Noela! Lunch break.”

“Kay!”

Noela hopped off Griffy’s back and sat on the picnic blanket. The griffin folded its legs and rested beside her.

“Here you go, Griff.” I slowly poured some water into Griffy’s open beak.

It moved its head slightly, drinking. “This is delicious!”

“Hey, how come I’m your master?”

“Huh? Master’s looking at Griff. Is he talking to Griff?”

“What, Master?” asked Noela.

“I drank some Translator DX. I can hear Griffy loud and clear.”

“Groo?! Noela drink too!” She rummaged through our stuff.

“I hear you perfectly, Griff.”

“Wow! Amazing! Now Griff can talk to you, Master!”

“So, why *am* I your master?”

“Griff isn’t sure. One day, Griff just started seeing you as Master.”

Griffy must’ve looked at Mina, Noela, and the other drugstore employees and reached that conclusion. I *was* the store owner and head of the household, so I supposed that checked out. Griffy also might’ve imprinted on me when it hatched—though I couldn’t say for sure, since I had no clue whether griffins did that.

Meanwhile, Noela emptied the Translator DX bottle. She listened to my conversation with Griffy, fascinated. “When fly, Griffy?!”

“Griff doesn’t know. Griff has never flown before.”

Obviously. I gently stroked Griffy’s head. It cooed quietly. *Jeez. You’re just so lovable.*

“Here’s your lunch, Noela.” Mina pulled a lunch box out of her basket. Noela opened it, revealing a bunch of sandwiches.

“Here’s your meat, Griffy!” said Mina.

“Thank you very much!” Griffy began munching the monster flesh. “Meat’s so tasty!”

We hadn’t needed to use monster seasoning or repellent at all recently; Griffy automatically ate monster meat now. Wild griffins typically consumed monster more often than human, beef, horse, or lamb—maybe that was why Griffy enjoyed it so much. It definitely also had to do with how smart Griffy had become. On a basic level, it understood that it mustn’t eat cattle or attack animals.

“Between meatballs and monster meat, which do you prefer?” I asked.

“Hmm. That’s tough. Meatballs are delightfully soft, and there’re bugs hidden inside, so they’re fun to eat. Meat, on the other hand, is meat—and therefore delicious!”

As Ejil had said, it wasn’t that griffins lost their ability to stomach bugs; it was just that they had fewer reasons to eat insects as they grew. Likewise, when it came to griffins not getting along with people, that was just because wild griffins grew up solitary.

Keeping Griffy as a pet wasn’t all rainbows, though. The problem was, if you domesticated a griffin, it didn’t need to run or fly. Griffy got three meals a day and was completely safe. Because it was tame, I worried that it lacked natural abilities it should’ve had. Animals that grew up in captivity were unfamiliar with the wilderness and other wild animals.

“Noela make Griffy fly, no matter what!”

Oops. I forgot our demonic drill sergeant.

Noela could transform into a wolf; that was the biggest difference between a werewolf and a beastling. It was a source of pride and identity for Noela, which was probably why she hated being confused with a beastling.

The fact that Noela was half-beast might’ve been why she refused to relax while teaching Griffy to fly. She was tough on Griffy because it couldn’t yet do what griffins were capable of.

“Have wings. Fly in sky!” Noela insisted. “Duh.”

“O-of course. Griff wants to fly too.” Griffy flapped its wings lightly, almost panicking. The gleam was gone from its eyes; the poor griffin sort of resembled a zombie.

Noela huffed triumphantly at Griffy’s response.

“Good luck, Griffy.” Mina stroked the griffin’s wings gently, sympathizing, as Griffy cooed sadly.

On the way home from the picnic, Griffy began to caw. “Kyuu! Kyuu!”

“What’s up?”

“There’s a monster at my feeding ground, Master!”

“For real?”

The “feeding ground” was the spot where we caught insects with bug gel every few days. *Did the gel attract a monster?*

“Do you think maybe some animals came to eat insects, and then a monster showed up to eat the animals?” Mina asked.

“Maybe. How many monsters are we talking, Griffy?”

“One boar titan, Master!”

“What’s that?”

“Big boar monster,” Noela told me.

“Seriously?”

Concerned, we got closer and closer to Griffy’s feeding ground. I immediately recognized the monster Noela described; it had its snout against the soil, munching the swarms of bugs. The boar titan had angry red eyes, and the wind carried its strong odor toward us.

“Snoooooorrrt!” The boar let out a loud cry, and the nearby small animals drawn by the bugs fled.

At that size, it’s got to be bigger than a bear. “If Ejil were here, he could take it out easily,” I muttered.

“What should we do, Mr. Reiji? Get Annabelle, perhaps?”

“Good idea, Mina. I’ll leave that to you. I’m going to see if I can use lure and repellent to lead the thing back into the woods.”

“But that’s too dangerous!”

“No worries. I’ll make sure to keep my distance.” I would spread the stuff on the ground and lead the boar toward the forest, keeping Griffy nearby in case I had to escape quickly. “Let Mina ride you back to town, Noela.”

“Uh-huh.” Noela quickly transformed. Mina got on her back, and she rushed

away.

“Now, time to get to work,” I murmured.

“Griff is hungry, Master.”

“Hmm?”

“May Griff eat the boar?”

“Er...sure. But what about the bugs?”

“Griff has room for both.”

Griffy had a look in its eyes not unlike a creature stalking its prey. *Actually, wait a sec... It looks more like a hungry child who was just served a mouthwatering steak.*

“Okay...but can you win? That boar’s pretty big.”

“You forget Griff is a vicious griffin.”

Griffy was all snuggles, but it did have a strong appetite. “All right, go ahead.”

I pulled out a bottle of the strength up I’d made during the martial arts tournament. *I’m glad I kept this bottle just in case.*

“What’s that, Master?”

“An amazing treatment. In a nutshell, it raises your attack power.”

“A-amazing treatment? Holy cow!” Griffy’s eyes sparkled; its wings flapped excitedly.

Still a kid, huh? The griffin opened its mouth for me, and I poured the strength up directly in.

“Kyuu...? Kyuuuu?! Master! Griff understands now that muscles are justice!”

“Remember, Griffy, strength is power!”

“That’s so cool!”

“Go get him!”

“Yahooooo!”

What kind of response is “yahoo”? Under the circumstances, I hadn’t

expected such a lighthearted reply. Griffy flapped its wings, galloping on the legs it'd bulked up playing tag with Noela.

Flap, flap, flap, fwoosh!

Flap, flap, flap, fwoooooosh!

Flap, flap, flap, fwoooooooooosh!

Each time Griffy switched between running and hovering, it was airborne a bit longer.

Flap, flap, flap, fwoooooosh, flap, flap, flap!

Oh, man! It's soaring!

"M-Master! Griff is flying!"

"That's amazing!" The strength up must've enhanced the already-incredible speed of the griffin's powerful legs. *I should've asked Griffy if I could ride on its back!*

"Griff is flying!" Griffy cried, kicking the air as it soared happily through the sky. "Whee!"

So childish.

"A-a griffin?! Where'd that come from?!"

Ah. The boar titan noticed Griffy. Thanks to the Translator DX running through my veins, I even understood the boar. *Not to toot my own horn, but man, that stuff rocks.*

"Griff's gonna eat ya!" Griffy threatened, circling overhead.

The boar slowly retreated from the feeding ground. It was nearly double Griffy's size, but all wild animals instinctively feared being swooped down on by an enemy.

"Kyuuuooooo!" With a powerful cry, Griffy suddenly began its rapid descent.

"Squooooiink?!" The boar titan whipped right around and made a beeline for the woods.

"Ha ha ha! Wait for Griff, porker!"

“Leave me alone!” the boar bellowed.

Griffy dove straight into the boar titan, which toppled over spectacularly. Both on land and in the air, Griffy’s supremacy was unrivaled.

“Can Griff eat the boar, Master?” Griffy called.

“Wait, wait! Time-out. It was mid-retreat—just let it go.”

“All right!”

The boar titan shook its head, rising to its feet. “You have my gratitude, human.” Its large body rocked unsteadily and vanished into the woods.

“Goodbye, meat,” Griffy called.

“We still have lots of monster meat at home, buddy,” I assured him. “Since you chased that big boar off, you can have three times as much as usual!”

“Three times?!”

I removed the bug gel from Griffy’s feeding ground, scattering some repellent. I figured we wouldn’t have any more monster problems there.

The sound of hooves galloping our way signaled Annabelle’s arrival on horseback. Shortly afterward, Noela showed up in wolf form, Mina on her back. Behind them, about ten people were running toward the feeding ground—probably mercenaries.

“Er, hey, Annabelle. This is, uh...”

“I know. I saw things wrap up on my way here.”

Crap. I never had a chance to tell her about Griffy.

“Folks in Kalta love to gossip,” Annabelle said. “Even if I don’t see somethin’ myself, I generally find out about it. This is your pet griffin, huh?”

Griffy cooed quietly.

“Dang! That thing chased off a boar titan,” she said, chuckling. “I was ready for a dirty job. Now what am I supposed to do?”

“I guarantee you, Griffy will never attack a human or anyone’s precious livestock,” I promised. “We raised it that way. Plus, it can chase off strong

monsters and stuff.”

“Hear Griffy with Master’s treatment, Red!” Noela chimed in. “Talk to Griffy!”

Good idea, Noela! “Yeah! You can communicate with Griffy using thought transference. It’s perfectly safe.”

“You’re all speaking up for Griff...?” The griffin’s eyes brimmed with tears.

Annabelle let out a long sigh. “You guys are actin’ like I already said no. Sure, it’d be a problem to have this griffin runnin’ through the middle of town, but if it sticks ’round the drugstore, it’s no skin off my nose. Besides, it clearly likes you guys. And even the townsfolk are lookin’ forward to watchin’ it grow up.”

A number of locals besides the store regulars *had* dropped into Kirio Drugs to see Griffy. Griffy was ours, but in a way, it’d also become the town’s griffin before we knew it.

“But, look, just ’cause I’m all right with *this* griffin don’t mean you can handle a monster alone next time one shows up. That’s way too risky,” Annabelle warned, exasperated.

She turned toward the approaching Red Cat Brigade members and headed back into town.

“It’s wonderful that you can fly now, Griffy!” Mina exclaimed.

Griffy cooed happily. Its demonic drill sergeant also looked thrilled.

Well, technically, Griffy flew because I gave it strength up, but if I tell Noela that, she’ll probably make poor Griffy start training here and now. I refrained from mentioning it for the time being.

“All done, Mr. Pharmacist!”

A week or so ago, I hired Gaston the carpenter to build Griffy a makeshift little stable behind the house. I currently stood in front of the new structure.

“Kyuu! Kyuu!” Griffy flapped its wings happily, spinning in place.

It was about two months since Griffy hatched, and it was already almost a full-sized griffin. Its gray fluff had completely changed to golden-brown adult

feathers.

“Thanks so much, Gaston.”

“No sweat! Drugstore treatments are always helpin’ me out,” the carpenter drawled, patting his lower back.

“Here’s the usual.” I handed him four energy potions I’d brought from the drugstore, giving his crew some too. It was my way of thanking them for making the stable cheaply.

“Thanks a bunch, Mr. Pharmacist.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Gaston and his crew departed. Noticing that the stable was finished, Noela came running out. “Griffy’s home ding, dang, done!”

“Gaston is a pro, after all,” I told her. “I figured this’d take longer, but his crew was super fast.”

“Groo!”

I gently stroked Griffy’s chest feathers. The griffin was tall enough now that I had to look up to see its face. “You’ll live in here from now on.”

“Kyu!”

“Here, Griffy!” Noela led the griffin into its new home. Since Griffy was about the size and shape of a horse, it fit in the stable easily. “Whoa.”

Although the stable’s exterior looked small, it was spacious. According to Gaston, it would fit at least two horses in addition to Griffy. And, thanks to its layout, Griffy just had to poke its head over the stall rail to eat.

“Kyu!” Griffy’s wings flapped twice, stirring up the straw on the ground.

“Gaston must’ve accounted for Griffy’s wingspan too.” *I should’ve expected as much from a legendary carpenter.* “Awesome. I’m glad it isn’t cramped in here.”

“Hey, Reiji!” Vivi, who was currently working in the drugstore, came over. “Li! Kyu’s home is all done? Man, I want one too! Getting here takes ages.”

“You’re a lake fairy, right? Live at your lake.”

Vivi frowned. “I’m not a fairy! I’m a spirit!”

“Like I can tell the difference.”

Ejil had a shift today too, so all Kirio Drugs’ staff members were present. We’d put a bunch of old products on sale, and our little shop was pretty busy right now.

“How’s the store looking?” I asked Vivi.

“Good. Mina and Ejil are keeping an eye on things.” Excluding myself, Mina and Ejil were the best employees to have on the job. “It’s great that you finally have a home, Li’l Kyuu!”

Griffy ignored Vivi, turning away. It treated Vivi completely differently from me or Noela, since Vivi was lower on its internal pecking order.

“Aw. Well...I-I caught some bugs today. Want them?” Vivi extended her hand toward Griffy’s beak, bugs resting on her palm.

“Er, that’s not a good—”

Griffy’s hard beak pecked at the bugs—and Vivi’s hand. *Thonk!*

“Ow!”

When Noela and I fed Griffy by hand, the griffin knew it should pick up food with its beak gently. But when it came to people Griffy wasn’t used to, this was generally what happened. It wasn’t that big of a deal last month, when Griffy was still the size of a chicken. Now, though, that beak had to hurt.

Vivi turned toward me, on the verge of tears. “Can I have a potion, Reiji...?”

“You can buy one of the potions on sale.”

“Wh-what about my employee discount?”

“You know that doesn’t exist. You’re a part-timer, remember?”

“Why do you have to be like that?! I’ve never even been late for work!”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

“You’re treating me like this because I’m a lake spirit,” Vivi wailed. “If I were human, you’d give me an employee discount and be all like, ‘My employees are

my family!’ and stuff.”

I mean, yeah, there are businesses like that... But does this girl just read feel-good stories in magazines about part-time gigs or something? She has really high expectations.

I gave the overly negative lake spirit a free potion. “There’s no employee discount, and you’re a part-timer, not a full-time employee.”

“Aw, come on!”

We’d already had this conversation. As I pushed Vivi back into the store, Ejil also popped in, holding two potions with sale tags still on them.

“What’s the matter?” I asked him.

“I’ve finally gotten my hands on them, Doctor.”

“Define ‘them.’”

Ejil thrust the discount potions toward me. “I finally saved enough rin to conquer the world—by which I mean Noela!”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, talking about saving,” I scoffed. “Every payday, you go into town and waste money on stuff like junk food.”

If Ejil bought the potions on payday, he could’ve gotten what he wanted in a single month. *How does he not realize that?*

“Y-yes, well...you know how it is.”

“Garroo? Potion?”

Oh. Noela’s noticed.

Ejil was suddenly reenergized. “Noela, my dear!”

Meanwhile, Noela seemed a bit freaked out.

“I bought these potions with my salary!” Ejil knelt and presented Noela with the two bottles. “Please accept them!”

Noela glanced at the potions and narrowed her eyes dramatically. “Discount potions. Old. Flavor not as tasty.”

“Wh-what?!” Ejil stared down at the bottles in stunned silence.

Personally, I couldn't really distinguish fresh potions from older ones. It wasn't like the flavor or benefits decreased over time. But an expert like Noela—who drank potions every day, whenever I gave her one—could apparently tell the difference.

"In that case, I shall do what must be done!" Ejil tried to approach Noela. She scuttled farther away.

"Kyu! Kyu!" Griffy glared at the demon king with a wild look.

I guess even Ejil is below Griffy on the pecking order.

"Hrm. What is it, griffin? You dare snarl at me?!"

"Kyu...kyu..." Griffy chirped nervously.

One sentence, and Griffy's already backing down, I mused. That's the demon king for you.

Now, however, Noela stepped in front of Griffy. "Ejil no bully!"

"Why do you hate me so?" Slumping his shoulders, Ejil gulped the discount potions, letting out a satisfied sigh. He reminded me of a middle-aged dude chugging a couple of beers. "I'll try again, Noela."

"Don't." Noela was as straightforward as ever. "Test today, Griffy."

"Kyu! Kyu!"

"Test?" I asked.

"Yup. Flying test."

Griffy had no longer been able to fly once the strength up wore off, which led to days of remedial training with Noela.

"You're calling it a test, so that means Griffy *can* fly to some degree, right?"

"Yup. But balance bad sometimes. Crash. Ba-boom."

So, Griffy was still poor at flying—at least, without drinking a strength up. According to Noela, though, it was thanks to the strength up that Griffy could now *imagine* flying. That helped it make much more progress since chasing off the boar titan.

Deciding to watch the “flying test,” I followed Noela as she guided Griffy out of its stable. The drugstore was nearby; if something happened, Mina could come get me.

“Go, Griffy!” Noela cried.

“Kyu!”

Da-dunk. Da-dunk. Griffy’s heavy steps rang out as the enormous beast sped up, spread its massive wings, and lifted off into the sky. I couldn’t hear its footsteps anymore, but I saw Griffy gallop with all its might as it flew.

Flap! Flap! The griffin beat its wings, increasing its speed.

“Kyuooooo!”

I’d only seen Griffy fly once before, and we’d cheated with strength up to get those results, so watching Griffy soar through the air nearly moved me to tears. Two months ago, Griffy had just hatched and could barely walk. Now look how much our griffin had grown!

I wasn’t the only one who felt that way. Noela was next to me with actual tears in her eyes. “Groo...”

“Awesome, huh?” I patted her head.

Griffy looked toward us and cawed, as if saying, “Look! Griff’s flying!”

“First time flew in one try,” Noela said. Not long ago, Griffy would fail to leave the ground or barely float before landing again.

I didn’t think I’d ever get tired of watching Griffy fly. “You held up your end of the deal, Noela. You took good care of Griffy. I’m proud of you.”

“Groo.”

Until Griffy got tired and landed, Noela and I happily watched it fly through the blue sky.

Afterword

HOWDY! It's me, Kennoji.

Thanks to you all, this series' fourth volume saw the light of day! Thank you so much. In this day and age, lots of "Narou" novelizations end in a volume or two, but here I am with four. I can't begin to describe how appreciative I am.

The craziest thing is that *Drugstore in Another World* started under a completely different label, then got picked up and rereleased by Brave Bunko. Add a manga on top of that, plus an anime on the way—talk about rare!

Oh—I didn't really make a fuss about it a second ago, but yeah! *Drugstore in Another World* is getting an anime adaptation. Seriously! This little story of mine is getting an anime!

I doubt I'll ever properly convey how grateful I am to the readers and staff who helped me get here. I plan to continue this chill, slow-life tale while adjusting to the fact that it's been chosen for an anime adaptation!

Volume 3 of the manga is on sale too, and it's doing well. It's super fun, so I highly recommend it to those of you who haven't given it a shot.

Thanks for reading all this. I hope you're looking forward to the next volume!

—KENNOJI



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